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BY WOMAN'S FAVOUR

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BY

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IN THREE VOLUMES—VOL. II

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BY WOMAN'S FAVOUR

CHAPTER XIV

NOT WOODED BUT WON

GEORGE returned to Hypatia Street in a high state of delight, and rehearsed his triumphs in society to the appreciative Lucy, who, however, thought them no more than his due.

‘What is Mrs. Fellowes like?’ was one of her first questions.

George was just about to answer that she was one of the most beautiful of God-created beings, when he bethought

himself, and said in a tone of abated enthusiasm, that she was not bad-looking.

‘Fair or dark, is she?’ asked Lucy, not with any idea of rivalry or jealousy, but simply from a feeling of pure interest.

‘Fair—golden-haired.’

‘H’m—dyed golden hair?’

‘No, almost the same colour as yours,’ answered George diplomatically, and Lucy, whose pale locks were a great deal more like straw than gold, coloured with pleasure.

‘And she ’ve invited you to a real big party!’ she said, in respectfully admiring tones.

‘Yes,’ answered George, ‘and that’s just what bothers me.’

‘Bothers you? Why?’ asked Lucy, opening her eyes wide.

‘Because,’ said George, ‘I’ve only got

these clothes, and I can't very well go to a swell party in a suit of dittoes—and not new at that, can I ?'

'No, of course not,' answered Lucy eagerly, shaking her head, 'you must have a black coat.'

'I must have a dress suit,' said George.

'Oh my !' said Lucy.

'Yes—it is oh my !' George said dolefully. 'Where I'm to get it from is more than I can tell.'

Lucy put her second finger, thimble-adorned, into her mouth, and sucked it reflectively.

'Can't you ask Mr. Vernon to lend you some ?' she proposed after a minute.

'I wouldn't,' said George decidedly.

'Haven't you got enough money left to pay for them ?'

George shook his head.

‘My dear girl, I’ve hardly a shilling in my pocket.’

‘I believe one can hire them,’ said Lucy.

But hired clothes did not meet with the ambitious views of the young man, and there was another pause.

‘What a pity you’re not a girl!’ said Lucy, eyeing him regretfully; ‘it would be as easy as easy to run you up something.’

George laughed.

‘No, dear, I’m glad I’m not a girl, even for the sake of being easily clothed,’ he said, with a touch on her cheek which brought the ever-ready blood mantling there again.

‘Well, but what are we to do?’ she said, with an affectionate glance at him. ‘Of course pa has his suit, but it wouldn’t fit you, even if he could spare it.’

‘No indeed,’ said George, congratulating

himself that he had not as yet attained the distinctly generous proportions of his landlord.

‘How much would they cost?’ asked Lucy after a little more meditation.

‘Four pounds—at the place I should go to,’ replied George.

Lucy sucked her thimble again, looked at George, hesitated for a moment, and finally said,

‘Look here, George. You won’t be offended with me if I say something?’

‘I wouldn’t be offended at anything you could say, dear,’ returned George, wondering what was coming.

‘Well,’ said Lucy shyly, ‘I’ve got two pounds of my own put away against some new things, but I wasn’t going to spend it yet—oh, not for a long time—and mother could give me two pounds out of the rent

money, which isn't due not for nearly six weeks. I could easily make it up to her by then, and you could spare five shillings or so a week out of your salary, when it commences, couldn't you?'

'It's awfully kind of you, Lucy dear!' said George, feeling genuinely moved, 'but I can't take it. It's not as if you were a man, you see.'

'Nonsense!' said Lucy crossly. 'What difference can it make? Aren't you and me as great friends as friends can be, anyhow.'

She turned up her pretty, flushed face towards him, and he stooped down and kissed her.

'Oh, George!' she whispered, hiding her crimson cheeks in both hands.

He sat down on the arm of her chair, and drew her close to him.

‘Are you angry with me, dear?’ he said.

Lucy took away her hands and showed him a smile.

‘N—no—I’m afraid I’m not,’ she said, ‘but perhaps I ought to be.’

‘Oh no, you oughtn’t. It’s quite natural that we should like each other very much, isn’t it?’

‘I’ve always liked you,’ said Lucy, nestling up to George.

‘And so I have you,’ he answered affectionately.

‘Only we can’t be married for a long time yet, because of ma and pa,’ said Lucy innocently.

Married! Oh dear, thought George, I’ve got myself into a pretty mess, but he answered with a sigh,

‘No, dear, I suppose not. Well, we must make the best of it.’

‘You know, I want soon to set up in business for myself,’ said Lucy, putting back her head so that she could see her lover’s face. ‘Mr. Jarvis once promised to lend me the money to start with whenever I felt that I knew enough to commence.’

‘H’m,’ George said, ‘do you think Jarvis meant if you married me?’

‘What’s that got to do with him, I should like to know,’ returned Lucy with a toss of her head, ‘he always knew I wasn’t going to marry *him*, anyhow!’

‘Did he ever propose to you?’

‘Did he?’ repeated Lucy with a laugh. ‘Lots of times, but I wouldn’t marry him, not if he was the last man left on the earth. To begin with, he’s a deal too small for me.’

‘You can’t complain of that in me!’ said George.

‘No,’ answered Lucy, looking up at him

with an adoring smile, 'you're a beautiful figure, that's what I said to ma that first evening.'

'No, did you?'

'I did, and ma thought so too. I never could bear a small man—and that Jarvis, why, I'm taller than him myself.'

A good deal more of the same kind of talk followed, but presently Lucy returned to the subject of George's clothes.

'Well now, at all events, you'll let us lend you that money, won't you?' she said, turning back her head again as it lay on George's arm, and looking coaxingly into his face.

George hesitated.

'I—no, Lucy, I don't like to ask your mother such a thing.'

'But ma need know nothing about it,' said Lucy persuasively. 'I'll borrow the

money off her for myself. She'll let me have it in a minute.'

George still shook his head, but Lucy closed his mouth with a kiss and a 'There, that's all settled, and we'll say no more about it.'

At this moment Mrs. Mellon came in with the supper-tray, and Lucy, without altering her position, said archly, 'I say, ma, look here !'

Mrs. Mellon looked, and opened her eyes wide.

'George an' me is going to get married, ma,' said Lucy. 'Wish us joy, won't you?'

She got up, drawing George after her—the reluctant George, from whose countenance beamed very little of the natural delight of the accepted lover.

'My dear !' began little Mrs. Mellon, but

her voice was instantly choked by the ever ready tears.

‘Don’t cry, ma,’ said Lucy quickly, ‘we ain’t going to get married until we can see our way clear, are we, George?’

‘No,’ answered George, and he meant it.

‘And anyhow, we sha’n’t never go off and leave you with pa, shall we, George?’

‘No,’ answered George again.

‘You shall come and live with us, sha’n’t she, George?’

‘Yes,’ replied George mechanically.

‘Oh, I couldn’t evaire be a burden to you,’ sobbed Mrs. Mellon.

‘You wouldn’t,’ cried Lucy warmly.

‘You shall do the housekeeping, while I attend to my millinery and George does his actin’. Isn’t that right, George?’

‘I suppose so,’ said George, with a marked absence of enthusiasm.

‘Suppose so! Just hark to him!’ said Lucy, laughing shrilly. ‘Perhaps you’d like to do the housekeeping or my work, and me or ma to do your actin’, would you?’

The two women now retired into the kitchen together to talk over matters, and George sat down in the armchair which had become his own particular property, and tried to collect himself.

His brain seemed in a whirl, in a strange confusion in which nothing was distinct but the faces of Lucy and Mrs. Fellowes. These—both framed in fair hair, but how different in form, in colouring, in expression!—kept showing themselves to him, while in his ear rang Lucy’s high uncultured voice, followed by Mrs. Fellowes’s soft, refined tones. After a little his thoughts cleared, and the reality began to shape itself before him. He was engaged—pledged to marry

Lucy Mellon. He had been only a few weeks in London, and already he stood committed for life. Was this the end of his ambition—was it for this that he had embarked with such painful perseverance on a course of self-education, had he been fitting himself to be—the husband of Lucy Mellon? A month or two ago, even this very morning, a union with Lucy would not have seemed at all so despicable a thing, but between this morning and now lay a gulf. He would never again be the man he had been this morning—since then he had been spoken to by a lady, he had talked with a lady as her equal. George Collins, who might have esteemed it rather an honour to mate with Lucy Mellon, was indeed no more: George L'Estrange, *gentleman*, reigned in his stead, towering far above Lucy Mellon and her lower sphere of life.

He felt bitterly annoyed with himself for having got into such a hole, as he expressed it ; and yet through his very real vexation pierced a note of flattered vanity, and a consciousness, that grew more and more distinct as he reflected, that what had happened was not without its advantages. Lucy Mellon, if no fit bride for a future great man, was still a very pretty, a very obliging and loving little girl, by no means to be slighted as a friend, a confidant, a humble companion, whom it would be pleasant enough to return to at evening wearied out with the day's toil, or to idle away the lazy mornings with, she at her work-table, he resting in this very armchair. As a friend — yes ; as a wife — no. George L'Estrange must have a woman like Mrs. Fellowes for wife ; a woman with soft white hands unscarred either by needle or scrubbing-brush, a woman whose

every movement shook out a wave of faint, delicious perfume, whose languid talk was of poetry and art, whose soul never condescended to cheese and beer. Poor Lucy ! How fond she was of periwinkles—of tripe and onions ! With half-closed eyes he brought before him a delicate, ring-decked hand daintily lifting an ivory-coloured cup, thin to transparency, full of exquisitely flavoured Orange-Pekoe. His wife must have such a hand, must drink out of a cup like that, she must——

‘ *Well*, George, asleep ? ’

George started violently, as his betrothed laid a somewhat heavy hand on his shoulder, while with the other she pulled down her flaxen fringe, gazing at herself in the mirror over the mantel-piece.

‘ Ma’s as pleased as pleased, I can tell you ! I won’t tell you all she’s been sayin’

about you, for fear of makin' you conceited, but she *is* pleased. She would have nothin' but she must run out and get a bit of pickled salmon for supper, to celebrate the occasion. You like pickled salmon, don't you, dear? I said I was sure you did.'

'So I do,' said George, getting up and returning her kiss, and in spite of poetry, fair women, and probable nightmare, he managed to make a very tolerable supper.





CHAPTER XV

GOING OUT

LUCY had her way about the money for the dress suit; and the following Sunday, clothed in new and shining black, with an immaculate shirt-front, in which glistened three gorgeous studs, ‘borrowed off’—as Lucy called it—Mr. Mellon, a tie whose faultless bow had passed through his *fiancée’s* clever fingers, and smart patent shoes, which the remainder of his own slender resources had just sufficed to purchase, George, with a wildly beating

heart, but with a conventionally stiff and starched exterior, made his appearance in Mrs. Fellowes's drawing-room. Lucy had brushed and laid out his things, had saved a little milk from tea to give a finishing polish to the shiny shoes, had, with her usual regard for the inner man, provided something extra for supper, and had seen him off with a last injunction not to get dusty, all with a tender unselfishness which ought to have touched him to the heart's core. But it was not of Lucy that he thought as the omnibus, with its cargo of servant girls returning from their 'Sunday out,' clerks, and shop girls, jolted heavily along the road. She, poor girl, held very little place in his life; she gave him all she could of love and care, and his manner of receiving her somewhat demonstrative affection seemed all that it should be in

her blinded eyes ; he spoke to her and thought of her with perfect kindness, but that was all. He might possibly have loved her in a sort of material way had he never known women in a superior station ; but when once he had crossed the threshold of Mrs. Fellowes's house, Lucy's chance was gone for ever.

The drawing-rooms were crowded—full to overflowing, even the stairs and landing being almost impassable. George, feeling very shy, slowly made his way through rows of brightly-dressed girls and tall-collared, retreating-chinned young men, until he reached the drawing-room, where, more beautiful than ever, in a wonderful gold-coloured gown, stood his hostess, welcoming each guest with a special word, and a smile sweet enough to warm his or her very heart for the rest of the evening.

‘Here you are!’ she said to George, ‘Mr. Vernon was just asking for you. Come, we’ll go into the room together, if you’re not afraid of the heat.’

And so—at the side of one of the loveliest women in London—George made his first *début* into London society.

Not London Society proper, to have the portals of which opened to you you must have been presented at Court, or at least have some good excuse for not having been so, but London theatrical, artistic society, in which brains stand in lieu of birth, and very often money instead of either. Mrs. Fellowes’s parties were celebrated. At her house you were sure to meet everybody worth knowing in the Bohemian world of London, the *crème de la crème* of the dramatic, journalistic, literary, and artistic professions. Many stragglers there were, too, from that

other more leisured world, who, while eagerly seeking an invitation to the wealthy manager's house, always tried to make the favour seem all on their own side, and privately thought that poor Mrs. Fellowes ought to be very grateful to them for honouring her Bohemian gatherings. 'And of course, you know, *she* is a lady by birth,' they would explain to their more strait-laced acquaintances, who considered that to meet actors and actresses without the intermediary purification of the orchestra and footlights was rather 'fast,' and 'improper.'

Mrs. Fellowes counted numberless cousins and other relations among the Upper Ten, who had carefully abstained, so long as she was poor and forlorn, from recollecting the ties of kindred, but who in these days of splendour had quite suddenly become devotedly attached to 'dear Helen.' Dear

Helen knew pretty well what their protestations were worth, but was far too politic to show any rancour or distrust. She was civil to them, sent them tickets for the play, invited them to her best parties, and smiled upon them whenever she saw them, while carefully avoiding any closer intimacy with them. There were several of these ladies from Belgravia and Mayfair here to-night, married women most of them, who thought it great fun to see the stars close, and to make themselves charming in the expectation of securing stalls for the new play, an invitation to the studio, or of persuading the new tenor to come and sing for nothing at their own select At Homes.

To one of these ladies—more than middle-aged, rubicund, and exceedingly *décolletée*—Vernon was talking when Mrs. Fellowes, with George meekly following at her heels,

came up. Vernon had on his most bored expression, although he was apparently paying due attention to what his companion was saying, and he hailed his hostess's advent with a look of relief.

'Dear Lady Pontifex,' said Mrs. Fellowes sweetly, 'I want to introduce Mr. L'Estrange to you.' She added in a murmur, 'Very clever, sings beautifully, a rising genius,' and leaving George, she swept away Vernon in her train.

George looked down helplessly at the portly figure before him. He had never felt so awkward in his life. What ought he to do? Sit down, or stand before her? Ought he to speak, or like a polite child wait till he was spoken to? His perplexity was solved by the lady herself, who, motioning towards the seat beside her which Vernon had just vacated, said suavely,

‘Won’t you sit down, Mr.—L’Estrange, I think Mrs. Fellowes said?’

‘Yes,’ said George, letting himself gently down on to the couch, and wishing himself far away.

Lady Pontifex, waving a huge black fan to and fro, turned a reflective face towards him, and calmly surveyed him for a moment, during which George found extreme difficulty in disposing of his hands and eyes. Then she inquired blandly,

‘The Somersetshire or Bedfordshire L’Estranges?’

George felt his well-starched collar grow limp as he answered in a voice he knew to be a tone or two higher than his own natural organ,

‘Neither, I come from Lancashire, Lady Pontifex.’

‘Oh indeed!’ said Lady Pontifex,

wondering why this good-looking young man should choose to say Lancasheer so oddly, and fixing her eyes meditatively on the borrowed shirt-studs, making George feel hotter than ever, for he knew that those jewels would not bear close inspection. After a pause she said slowly.

‘You sing?’

‘A—a—little,’ stammered George.

‘Are we to have the pleasure of hearing you to-night?’ asked Lady Pontifex, regretting that dear Helen had taken away that clever, witty Mr. Vernon, only to leave her this very dull and commonplace young man, who seemed so stupid that he must surely sing most beautifully.

But here something better than she looked for happened. George had cooled down, and with his normal temperature his usual self-possession returned to him.

He had quite enough acumen to perceive that Lady Pontifex, in spite of the title which had at first awed him, had much more in common with the type of woman he was in the habit of associating with than — Mrs. Fellowes, for instance. He launched forth very much at random, losing his self-consciousness as he grew excited, and managed to create a far from unfavourable impression on Lady Pontifex, who was herself about as unintellectual and uncultured as it was possible to be, but who expected, when she deigned to grace one of her niece's parties, to be amused and entertained. When Mrs. Fellowes came up to ask George to recite, she found her portly aunt rolling with laughter, and more purple in the face than ever.

‘A most amusing person, my dear!’

she whispered ; ‘ I must have him for my own Thursdays.’

George accompanied his hostess to the part of the room sacred to that modern invention of the Evil One, the drawing-room recitation, and there, hemmed in by a crowd of more or less attentive listeners, he repeated in its native dialect one of his own poems. A little buzz of admiration greeted him as he ended, several people asked to be introduced to him ; and when, a little later, he sang, to his own accompaniment, a pathetic ditty treating of the loves and woes of a collier and his lass, he was most enthusiastically applauded. Success is sweet, and as George stood in the midst of this well-dressed throng, nearly every member of which had distinguished him or herself either in art, literature, or the drama,

he felt glad that he had hidden his money at the bottom of his water-jug, and had escaped from the thralldom of the Bell and Boot.

Vernon watched his friend's success with glad, generous eyes.

'I told you so,' he said triumphantly to Mrs. Fellowes. 'I knew he had something in him!'

'I should say he had a very great deal in him,' returned Mrs. Fellowes dryly, looking to where George's handsome head towered above a circle of admirers.

'How you say that! you don't like him, I suppose,' said Vernon in an aggrieved tone.

'Oh, you know how difficult I am to please,' she answered with a light laugh; 'and besides, even if I don't like him to-day, very likely I shall adore him to-morrow.'

Vernon looked keenly at her.

‘No, I don’t think you are changeable,’ he said in a low voice.

‘Don’t you? How can you tell? What does any one know about any one else?’ she laughed. ‘But come, Dick, we are getting to personalities, and you know how I hate that. Let us talk about anything—anybody—Mr. L’Estrange—rather than about ourselves.’

‘Very well,’ said Vernon.

‘And I wanted to ask you something. Hasn’t it struck you that Jim is looking dreadfully harassed and haggard lately?’

Vernon glanced across the room at Mr. Fellowes as he stood talking to a well-known playwright.

‘He looks to me pretty much the same as usual. Do you think there is anything the matter with him?’

‘N—no,’ answered Helen a little doubtfully. ‘I only wondered if it was my own fancy. I daresay he is anxious about the new play.’

An hour later the house was empty, the last carriage had rolled away, and the drawing-room looked curiously bare with its wide tracts of carpet where so lately there had hardly been standing-room.

Mrs. Fellowes waited until her husband came upstairs from escorting the last of his guests to the door, and then with a bright, ‘Good-night, Jim, I’m awfully tired!’ and a nod, went away to her own room.

Left alone, James Fellowes took up his stand on the hearth-rug, and looked round the great deserted room. He listened to the rustle of his wife’s gown, and as he heard the door upstairs shut behind her a curious expression crept over his face. He

turned and took a photograph from the mantel-piece behind him. It was of his wife, and a very good one. He gazed at it long and earnestly, and then dropped his arm by his side, still holding the portrait in his hand. Presently, after staring straight before him with lack-lustre eyes, he replaced the photograph, and with a long, deep-drawn sigh, went slowly out of the brilliantly-lighted room.





CHAPTER XVI

AFFLICTED

THE week succeeding Mrs. Fellowes's At Home was one of feverish excitement for George. The new play was to come out on the Saturday, there were daily rehearsals, he became acquainted with those actors and actresses whom he had hitherto seen only from 'the front,' but who were now his comrades, his fellow-workers. His own part was insignificant enough, but he was also given the part of another actor, named Beaumont, to understudy ; and if ever man

longed fervently for the removal, by indisposition or otherwise, of his enemy, George longed for the removal of Beaumont. He rapidly grew in favour with his companions, who were for the most part an easy-going, good-natured set, each moving more or less as the central figure in a tiny world of his own construction, and each sublimely certain that he was the best actor in the world, as he would be able to prove when the cabal which so persistently conspired to keep him in the background would give him 'a chance.'

The leading lady, Miss Gwendoline Maltravers, was always a great attraction at the Thespis. Although not much over thirty years of age, she had had an already eventful career, the details of which were shrouded in a good deal of mystery, never alluded to by herself, and related by others with a

wonderful degree of variety. According to some, she came of an old aristocratic Roman Catholic family, was convent-bred, and, impelled by the force of her genius, had broken loose and thrown herself into the arms of the drama in a manner sufficiently scandalous to cause her family promptly to disown her for ever. This legend was strengthened by the fact of her always having a crucifix hung over the looking-glass in her dressing-room in every theatre she played at. Others said that she had been a flower-girl of the lowest antecedents, that her extreme beauty and gracefulness had attracted the attention of a certain manager, who had picked her out of the gutter, had her educated, and brought her out at his own theatre. Scandal whispered that the diamonds which became her so well came from the same benefactor,

and that they had not been given to her merely for her proficiency in acting. Besides these two versions of her life, there were not wanting hints as to the favour shown her by Royal personages, her wild extravagance and capricious temper, her indolence and perversity. And meanwhile Miss Maltravers pursued the even tenor of her way, perfectly aware of, and much diverted by, the numerous stories told about her, and curling her beautiful lips in supreme scorn at the idea that any one of them could injure her.

Whatever her origin, whatever the virtues or shortcomings of her private life, Miss Maltravers was an excellent actress, passionately devoted to her art. She had been at the Thespis for some years now, almost indeed since its opening, and Mr. Fellowes could probably have told more than most people re-

specting the favourite actress's past existence. But James Fellowes was not a man to talk, and if he was acquainted with any of Miss Maltravers's secrets, he alone and no one else was ever any the wiser.

George had been introduced to Miss Maltravers at Mrs. Fellowes's party, and the actress, who was by no means difficult of access, had at once taken rather a fancy to him, and had invited him to her house in St. John's Wood.

After one of the rehearsals she proposed to him to come back and dine with her, laughingly telling him he must take pot-luck, as she was all alone. George gave a thought to the supper-table in Hypatia Street, with its highly-seasoned cheap delicacies, and consented with alacrity. They drove to St. John's Wood in a hansom, Miss Maltravers entertaining him

on the way with a good deal of professional scandal. Her manners were frankly unceremonious and easy, she gave and allowed a large amount of latitude, and without being exactly unrefined, quickly conveyed an impression of good-fellowship and freedom very agreeable to George. In the course of conversation he happened to mention Mrs. Fellowes. Miss Maltravers became grave at once.

‘How I do hate that woman!’ she said, and her expressive features bore out the words.

‘You hate Mrs. Fellowes?’ said George, surprised.

‘Yes, I hate Mrs. Fellowes,’ she answered with concentrated energy. ‘I’ve always detested her from the first day I saw her. Stuck-up, insolent creature!’

‘Is she?’ said George.

‘Ah, you don’t know her well enough yet. Wait a little! But perhaps, after all, she keeps her impertinent airs for her own sex. She can be pleasant enough to men, we all know that.’

She laughed meaningly.

‘Isn’t Dick Vernon a dear friend of yours?’

‘I know him better than any one else in London,’ answered George.

‘Ah, well, take care you don’t come between him and Mrs. Fellowes, that’s all!’

‘Why—do you mean——?’ said George, bewildered.

Miss Maltravers nodded, with a malicious light shining in her fine dark eyes.

‘Yes, I do mean—very much. Why, my poor innocent boy, it’s a story as old as the hills to everybody else! To everybody

except to that poor fool James Fellowes! Why, she knew him before she ever met Fellowes—abroad somewhere.'

'Dear me!' murmured George, certain looks and words of Vernon's coming back to him with a new significance.

'Dear me!' mimicked Miss Maltravers. 'Are our fresh country feelings shocked? Did we expect to find bucolic primitiveness, a sort of Garden of Eden without a serpent? You had better look to yourself, my dear boy. Helen Fellowes is as dangerous a woman as ever existed. It is just these quiet, saintly, superior women who are the worst, the most vicious at heart. Take care she does not entangle you in her meshes as she has poor Dick Vernon.'

George thought of Mrs. Fellowes's pure, proud face, and a feeling of indignation arose in his heart as this woman with a

tarnished reputation took her name, as he felt sure, in vain ; but the next moment he sneered at himself for his own credulity, and said coolly,

‘No fear ! she’s not my kind.’

Miss Maltravers was silent until the cab stopped before a door in a high wall, in one of the quietest, most out of the way little roads in St. John’s Wood. She rang, and the door was unlatched by some spring from the house ; they entered, and walked up a gravelled path which led up to the pretty house standing in the midst of a garden full of fruit trees, soft grass, and spring flowers.

Before they got to the house, its door opened and a strange little figure came out and advanced towards them. Its height was that of a child of nine or ten years old, but the face belonged to an old, experienced,

worldly-wise woman. Two piercing, uncannily-bright black eyes, set in a sharp, angular, deadly white frame, surrounded by a shock of fuzzy dark hair, pale thin lips covering pointed teeth, a fantastic dress serving rather to accentuate than to conceal the cruel elevation between the shoulders, long skinny hands eagerly gesticulating, and helping out the shrill, cracked voice, and over all, that pinched pathetically hopeless air proper to all hunchbacks.

‘There you are, Gwen!’ cried the high, squeaky voice, stopping short as the eyes encountered a stranger.

‘My little Prue! My darling!’ said so soft, so sweet a voice at George’s side that involuntarily he started and turned to look for its owner. He saw Miss Maltravers’s ordinarily somewhat hard features all melting and glowing, her eyes going out

with passionate love to the grotesque little figure beyond, he saw her stoop and gather it into her arms with a tenderness which far surpassed anything she had ever exhibited on the stage.

The little creature nestled against her bosom and shut her eyes.

‘Mr. L’Estrange!’ said Miss Maltravers, turning to him with an almost dramatic air, ‘this is the only person on earth that loves me, my little—sister, Prue.’

Prue opened her eyes and fixed them shrewdly upon George’s embarrassed face.

‘It’s rather difficult to know what to say, isn’t it?’ she croaked with an elfish laugh. ‘You can’t say, “Oh, what a pretty little girl!” or even “What a sweet child!” can you? Suppose you say, “How *interesting*!”’

She drawled out the last word with an

indescribably comic grimace, watching him all the while intently. And then George showed himself the genius he was.

‘How interesting!’ he repeated, in as near an imitation of her voice as he could manage.

Prue clapped her bony hands, reminding George of a skeleton dangling from the roof of an old bone-setter’s he had known long ago in his childhood.

‘He’ll do, he’ll do, he’s got sense!’ she called out; ‘put me down, Gwen, I want to shake hands with him.’

Miss Maltravers, still with the extreme gentleness which seemed to George to sit so oddly on her, stooped and put the little creature down. She waddled up to George and held out one of the claw-like hands.

‘Shake, old pard. You an’ me ’ll be pals!’ she said, with a perfect American accent.

‘You are favoured,’ observed Miss Maltravers smiling; ‘it is not many people that Prue adopts so readily.’

‘People are generally idiots,’ said Prue sharply. ‘But Mr. L’Estrange has his wits about him. I can always tell by the way people speak to me and look at me when they first see me.’

They went into the house, the little hunchback leading the way, chattering all the time in her high excited voice.

‘In here, Mr. L’Estrange, this is the drawing-room. Now Gwen must take off her things, and I must tell Ben to lay an extra place.’

She stumped away, leaving George by himself in the bright chintz-covered, flower-decked room, in which, notwithstanding its evidences of feminine habitation, a distinct odour of cigarette-smoke lingered.

In a moment Prue was back again. She ensconced herself in a low chair, evidently her own property, and waving one of the bony hands at George said,

‘Sit down there opposite me. I know all about you.’

‘Do you?’ said George, laughing and doing as he was told. Prue nodded.

‘Yes, I know all about everything and everybody at the Thespis. Gwen tells me about it all every time she comes home.’

‘Have you seen your sister act?’ asked George.

Prue frowned.

‘Oh yes!’ she said mockingly. ‘I look like a person who goes to the theatre, don’t I? Gwen would be proud of me, wouldn’t she?’

‘But do you never go out, then?’

‘Never when I can help it. I can’t bear

being stared at by vulgar people, or being pitied and spoken to in the same way that you speak to a pet dog. I'd much rather stay here and go out in the garden. Before we were rich enough to have a garden I very seldom got out at all, and then I wasn't nearly as well as I am. Oh, I'm quite handsome now to what I was a year or two ago !'

She looked down at her misshapen proportions with the queerest twist of her features, and then suddenly peered up into George's face, as if trying to surprise his real impression.

'Don't I make you shiver?' she asked.
'Don't you feel quite ill?'

'Not at all, thank you!' responded George seriously.

'Oh well, if you come here often you'll have to get used to me,' said Prue. 'But

don't you think it's awfully funny that such a lovely person as Gwen should have such a—a scarecrow for a sister ?'

She paused for a second, and then continued with a shrill chuckle,

'Never mind, you needn't answer. It's rather hard on you to expect you to find things to say which I shouldn't believe when you'd said them, so let's talk about something else. Do you like being an actor? Gwen thinks you rather clever.'

George, who felt a mere infant before this extraordinary little creature, murmured mildly that he liked it very much.

'And you recite, and sing, and play. Oh, you see I know all about you. And after dinner you'll recite, and sing, and play to me.'

'With pleasure,' said George.

'You needn't think that because I don't

go to the theatre I don't know a good thing when I hear it,' observed Prue, pursing up her mouth. 'I've heard all the best people, they always do their things for me when they come to see sister.'

She was silent a minute, and then with a sigh, which shook the whole of her small person, she observed,

'It is such a pity that I'm like this, and that I can't be an actress! How I should have liked it!'

She tapped one foot impatiently, and looked away from George out to the garden beyond, when suddenly she sprang up with an exclamation, and looking exactly like some old malicious fairy, darted out through the open French window, and began chasing a black cat round and round the flower-beds, with such elfish movements, clapping of her long hands, and raven-like hops and

bounds, as made George stare with a half-superstitious wonder.

As he stood looking, Miss Maltravers came into the room and advanced to the window.

‘Ah, there’s Prue!’ she said with a smile, looking fondly out at the curious little figure. ‘I thought she would have been entertaining you.’

‘So she has,’ replied George. ‘She only just ran out there. What a wonderfully intelligent—child she is,’ he added, rather doubtful as to the applicability of the last epithet.

‘Is she not?’ said Miss Maltravers warmly. ‘She is the comfort of my life. My only trouble about her is that she is so sensitive to her own appearance. I cannot get her to go out, although she will see people here without shrinking.’

‘Perhaps that will wear off in time,’ suggested George.

Miss Maltravers shook her head.

‘No, it has got worse ever since she really understood that she is deformed. My poor Prue! My eyes are so accustomed to her that I don’t notice it, but no doubt to strangers she looks different.’

Presently a boy in buttons announced dinner. Prue was summoned, and they went into the dining-room, where a simple but well-cooked meal awaited them. Ben, the page, afforded George a good deal of amusement by his evident terror of his mistress’s sister, upon whose features he kept a constant eye, which very much interfered with the successful performance of his duties as butler. Happening to glance towards Prue at a moment when Ben appeared absolutely paralysed, George

caught sight of the most awful and absolutely hideous grimace he had ever beheld on human countenance, evidently performed for the boy's benefit, and which more than accounted for his fright. Noticing that George was looking at her, Prue relaxed her features and favoured the young man with a wink, the goblin slyness of which positively made his flesh creep.

Miss Maltravers seemed moody, and spoke but little. She had not much appreciation of humour, and was singularly uncultured as far as book-learning goes. She knew her Shakespeare well, but did not love him, and indeed, as she frankly confessed, she did not care for reading of any kind. The excitement of her nightly *rôle* was sufficient for her—that, her sister, and her own thoughts made up her whole life nowadays. She was hardly an amusing

companion, for her moods were many and unequal, and in spite of an appearance of great openness and *camaraderie*, she never let any one into the sanctuary of her mind. She was very good to look at, however, and Prue made up for any deficiencies in the way of conversation.

She chattered incessantly, racing from one subject to another, treating everything with an audacious frankness and freshness of view perfectly astounding to George. If Miss Maltravers did not love books, her sister worshipped them, and a strange collection she seemed to have read.

Gwendoline listened proudly, admiringly, glancing at George from time to time as much as to say,

‘Just listen ! Isn’t she clever ?’

And indeed George grew absolutely fascinated after a time. His ear became

attuned to the high shrill accents, his eye familiarised itself with the strange personal deformities, and he found need of all his intelligence to keep up with the curious odd medley which poured from the eager lips of his extraordinary little interlocutor.

‘I don’t like Gwen’s part in the new play!’ she announced presently.

‘Don’t you? Why not?’ asked George.

‘Oh, it’s too namby-pamby, too everyday for Gwen. She ought to have a really good strong part—like Fedora, you know—not one like this, where she has nothing to do but to wear tea-gowns, and sob and whine and cry.’

‘Prue’s ambitious for me, you see,’ said her sister, smiling.

Prue jumped down from her chair—they had finished dinner—and hurled herself upon her sister’s neck.

‘Aren’t you the dearest, and cleverest, and best of actresses!’ she cried, accompanying each word with a hug. In another second she had sprung away, and was looking suspiciously at George.

‘He’s thinking he never saw such a hideous little fool before!’ she said with a frown, and turning abruptly, she went out of the room.

‘Poor little girl!’ sighed her sister.

‘She’s an exceedingly amusing companion,’ observed George.

‘Yes, but an unhappy little creature, in spite of all I can do. She can never forget for long together that she is different from other people. Mr. Vernon is the only person besides myself that she is really attached to; she is never bitter or sarcastic with him.’

‘Does he often come?’ asked George.

Miss Maltravers's brow clouded.

‘Not now,’ she answered; ‘not since Mr. Fellowes married. He was constantly here before. But I suppose he has more entrancing occupations now. He is always very good to Prue, though. Half her books are presents from him, and he never makes his appearance without something in his pocket for her.’

‘He is a very good-hearted fellow,’ said George.

‘Isn't he?’ she answered, so eagerly and with such a light in her eyes that George was master of her secret from that moment.

‘What a lucky dog that Vernon is!’ he said to himself half an hour later, as he shut the door of the house in St. John's Wood after him, and set out to walk back to Camden Town. ‘To have two such splendid women in love with him—for, from

what Miss Maltravers says, it's apparently a well-known thing that he and Mrs. Fellowes are devoted to each other. I wonder whether he knows that Miss Maltravers is also at his feet? And yet I don't see so very much in him after all. Well—my turn must come—and meanwhile I must work patiently.'

He did not say much in Hypatia Street about his new acquaintances. Lucy's inquisitive remarks jarred upon him; he was becoming every day more sensitive to the difference between the Mellons and his present associates. Lucy looked at everything from such a very material point of view. What there had been to eat, what the ladies had worn, what every one's probable income was; these were the things that interested her, and these were just the things that George did not care to talk

about. He would not describe Prue to her, he was afraid of some tactless observation which would irritate him, and strain a little harder the already too tightly-strung bond which tied him to Lucy. So he only said he had been with a friend from the theatre, an explanation which perfectly satisfied Lucy, who was too accustomed to the erratic movements of the other sex to be exacting, and who only thought it natural that George should be a favourite, and should be invited out.

She would have been very unhappy, poor girl, could she have fathomed the workings of George's mind, or could she have guessed his growing distaste for her company,—his critical attitude towards her. But, perhaps luckily for her, her susceptibilities were far from delicate. She had a great deal to do just then—

worked hard all day, and was too tired at night to notice whether George put less tenderness into his voice than usual, or whether he was silent and moody. She was quite content in his promise to marry her; she loved him so honestly, so dearly, that it never occurred to her to question his affection for her, she took it for granted that he loved her as much as she loved him.

So the days passed quietly by, Lucy building all sorts of artlessly loving castles in the air, for herself and George, not one of which was ever to come to anything, and George equipping himself for his approaching entrance into public life.



CHAPTER XVII

BEHIND THE FOOTLIGHTS

THE great night at last arrived, and, if all was bustle and expectation at the Thespis, there was hardly less commotion in Hypatia Street. Lucy had not slept for two nights for thinking about her George, and the grand figure he was going to make. Mrs. Mellon, stirred by her daughter's excitement, had a bad attack of 'reminiscences,' which always involved a long and minute description of her own *début*, after a tedious and painful training

under 'a man what was a brute, my shildren!' Mr. Mellon rather affected to despise the legitimate drama, never failing, whenever he saw George, which was as seldom as the latter could manage, to repeat to him that it was a thousand pities he hadn't gone in for the serio-comic business. He endeavoured to lend George two or three half-crowns on the strength of his engagement, but George was not a man to be taken in twice, and always declined the loan with thanks. Only Mr. Jarvis held aloof. He, poor fellow, had been in purgatory almost from the day George came to town. His life was a daily torture to him, and yet he had not the strength of mind to remove himself from the scene of his woes. To see Lucy all absorbed in George and George's fortunes was indeed almost more than he could

bear, but not to see Lucy at all would be quite too much. So he stayed on in Hypatia Street, and would have been a living reproach to Lucy, had she possessed any eyes except for George.

But she saw nothing. She never looked at Mr. Jarvis, and hardly ever spoke to him. She was all devotion to George, thinking only of him, working only for him, longing only for the day when he should give her the right to care for him altogether, when she should be the proud and happy Mrs. L'Estrange.

Mrs. L'Estrange! She often said the words softly to herself, and thought they sounded more beautiful every time. Lucy L'Estrange—the names couldn't go better together, and how nice they looked when written! George was so clever, she knew he would get on; and as Mrs. Mellon was a

good manager, Lucy didn't see why they should have to wait so very long. As it never occurred to her, poor girl, so well had George acted this his first part, that he was not as anxious as herself, she spoke about their marriage with the utmost frankness and simplicity, not dreaming of the internal sneer with which he listened to her loving and unselfish plans.

To tell the truth, George was getting very tired of Hypatia Street. It was a long way from the theatre or the Museum, or any other part of town he ever wanted to get to ; he did not like to say where he lived, for fear of being laughed at ; it would be impossible ever to bring any of his friends there ; and last, but not least, Lucy was beginning to pall upon him dreadfully. He was not going to marry her, that was quite certain, and his own easy conscience

entirely absolved him from any blame in the matter. Lucy had really and truly thrown herself at his head—it was she who had proposed to him, not he to her. How could she seriously think that a man of his abilities, who in a few short weeks had got himself taken up by the most fashionable professional people in London, would ever consent to tie himself for life to—well, to a common work-girl? For that was all she was, after all. A very warm-hearted and genuinely good and honest girl, but still a work-girl, with coarse hands and a cockney accent. Did she imagine that he could talk to Mrs. Fellowes, to Lady Pontifex, to Miss Maltravers, and not see the difference between those ladies and herself? Her very want of perception, her assumption that she was quite good enough for him, was offensive, and showed how far

apart they were. Her father was a disgusting old drunkard, her mother tiresome and vulgar with her Army of the Lord and her everlasting household details.

Altogether, Mr. L'Estrange felt that he had honoured Hypatia Street with his presence quite long enough, and he was only seeking a decent excuse for getting away. He dreaded a scene, tears from Mrs. Mellon and Lucy, and, above all, being followed to the Thespis, perhaps, by his drink-besotted future father-in-law, who would, he felt sure, lose no opportunity of annoying and insulting him on pretence of protecting his daughter.

He had decided, however, to let things remain as they were until after the first night of the play, and then he would make an attempt to cut his Gordian knot as well and as quietly as he could. The fuss that

Lucy and her mother were making over him this week was becoming almost unbearable. Lucy had taken to tip-toeing about the room, so as not to disturb him in his 'studies,' and Mrs. Mellon and she made plans for the future in perfectly audible whisperings that nearly drove him distracted.

All things, however, have an end, and at length the Saturday dawned. Lucy and her mother were, of course, going to be present, and insisted on starting far too early in order to get front seats in the pit. George himself was in a high state of nervousness, which he was particularly anxious to conceal, fearing the ridicule of his comrades, for, above all things in the world, he hated being laughed at.

Through the hole in the drop-scene he reconnoitred the house. There were Mrs.

Mellon and Lucy in the pit, the former with a new and altogether worldly bonnet made by her daughter for the occasion, and looking very hot and amiable, and Lucy with a rather white face, her hair more elaborately curled than ever, and a pair of light gloves which went singularly ill with her somewhat shabby dark dress. And there, in the best box, was Mrs. Fellowes in black and silver, more lovely than ever, talking and laughing with the author of the play, whom her husband had just brought in with him. George glanced down at the pit, at that honest, common face, pale with anxiety and excitement on his account, then his eyes travelled upwards, and contrasted it with the beautiful refined features with their careless, easy smile, and his heart grew bitter as he thought that the first was all his, his by nature, his own birthright,

while the other was as far removed from him as the stars in the sky. How lovely Mrs. Fellowes looked—how dowdy and vulgar was Lucy in comparison with her! His heart and soul revolted then and finally against his little milliner friend, and with his teeth shut he vowed that he would get away from her and her associations at once and for ever. And meanwhile poor unconscious Lucy was counting the moments till the curtain should go up, and answering her mother's remarks at random, for before her eyes floated an image of George—her handsome, clever, wonderful George, 'so true and so fond,' and who was going to be so great and celebrated.

At last the curtain did go up, the critics in the stalls squared themselves and put on airs of attention. Mrs. Fellowes leaned back and shut her fan, Mrs. Mellon took

an acid drop, and unfolded her clean handkerchief lest there should be any occasion for tears, Lucy clasped her hands tight, and the play began.

It went on smoothly enough ; there were never any first-night hitches at the Thespis. Miss Maltravers played with her usual skill, looked very handsome, and got a great deal of applause from all parts of the house. George's appearance was towards the end of the first act. At the appointed time he entered, announced some visitors, retired, and Lucy's interest in the play was over. No one but she could have noticed the slight—very slight—pause the butler had made before bringing out his words ; but she had, and knew that George had felt dreadfully nervous, and had hardly been able to speak. She privately thought it very shabby of Mr. Fellowes to give her

lover only such an absurdly small part, but was quite sure that he would soon get promotion. She, poor girl, knew how well he could play first lover, much better than that stick of a man, as she said to her mother, who was supposed to be in love with Miss Maltravers.

‘It is not so easy as it looks, my child,’ replied Mrs. Mellon. ‘I remember the first time I went on the wire before an audience I nearly died of fright, and yet they could perceive nothing, and applauded me — ah!’

‘It ain’t the same thing at all, ma,’ said Lucy, jealous for her lover’s profession. ‘You don’t have to speak on a wire. It’s the speaking as is the thing.’

‘Bah!’ returned Mrs. Mellon, ‘it is far easier to wag your tongue on a steady floor than to advance your feet on a high,

thin wire, with no net beneath you.
How——'

'Hush—sh!' said the fat man next Mrs. Mellon at this juncture, and she, after turning and withering him with a haughty stare, was fain to be silent.

If the public were satisfied with the play, as the hearty applause at the end of each act tended to show, Mr. Fellowes himself was not. He was only too keenly alive to its hackneyed commonplaceness, to its want of real literary merit. It was, as all the others before it had been, the best he could get, but it was not what he wanted.

As George came off, all tremulous from his ordeal, the manager was standing at the wings, and gave him a kindly encouraging word.

'The play's going splendidly, don't you think so?' said George.

Fellowes nodded his head.

‘Yes, well enough. But it’s not much to boast of. If’—he added half to himself—‘if only I could find a man who would write me a play after my own heart, he and I would do some good business together!’

George heard the muttered words, and a flash leaped into his gray eyes, his lips parted, but closed again tightly, and he moved aside to let his employer pass.

His work was over for the evening, but he hung about until the end of the play, having to escort his landlady and her daughter home, and half-hoping that Mrs. Fellowes would either send for him to go into her box or that she would come behind the scenes. Nothing of the sort happened, however. When he looked through the hole in the curtain after it had fallen to

the sound of most vociferous applause at the end of the last act, he saw that Vernon had come in from the Parthenon, and was talking to Mrs. Fellowes. A spasm of angry jealousy contracted George's heart as he watched the smiling face that had no thought for him, and in that moment a feeling against Vernon was born in his breast. As he turned away he came upon Miss Maltravers, already cloaked and muffled to go home.

‘Are you coming with us?’ she asked.

‘I don't know where you are going,’ answered George.

‘Oh, I thought perhaps you were coming too. We are all going to supper at Mrs. Fellowes's.’

‘I've not been asked,’ said George sulkily; ‘and besides,’ he added grimly, as a vision of the supper-table in Hypatia

Street rose before him, 'I have another engagement.'

'Two good reasons,' said Miss Maltravers, smiling. 'Well then, good-night. When are you coming to see us again? Prue has taken quite a fancy to you, and is always asking after you. Come to tea—say to-morrow—and we can go down to the theatre together afterwards.'

George accepted the invitation, and Miss Maltravers was fetched a moment afterwards by Mr. Fellowes. George went out by the stage door, where he knew Lucy and her mother would be waiting for him. Just as he reached it he saw Miss Maltravers getting into Mrs. Fellowes's carriage, and caught Mrs. Fellowes's light laugh as she bent forward. Vernon and Mr. Fellowes followed, and the carriage drove away, not one of them having

noticed George, who stood on the pavement, feeling lonely, exiled, and wrathfully miserable.

‘Here he is, ma!’ cried Lucy, making a dash at him. ‘Oh, George, how well you looked, and how beautiful you did it! Me and ma was delighted, wasn’t we, ma?’

Two of the supers who were just passing out looked round as Lucy’s by no means subdued tones fell upon their ears, and laughed. George walked on ungraciously, leaving the two women to follow as they chose.

‘I wanted so to call out Brayvo!’ said Lucy enthusiastically, as with her mother clinging to her arm she trotted fast to keep up with her unamiable lover; ‘but I thought p’raps you wouldn’t like it. You did look well, though, and no mistake!’

‘Here’s our ’bus!’ said Mrs. Mellon; to

George's relief there were only two places inside, and although Lucy would have been perfectly willing, and indeed would have preferred to go on the top, she could not leave her mother, and so George climbed to the roof by himself.

He was infinitely glad to be rid of the girl's admiring chatter for awhile. He had been more excited, more wound up than he himself knew, and now that the trial was over he was in an uncomfortable, almost hysterical state of reaction. Lucy's sharp voice still rang through his ears, and he angrily attributed his annoyance to her tactless praises, but in reality it had nothing to do with Lucy. He was vexed, deeply mortified that he should be of so little account, should be left out in the cold, as it were, to go home with the other supers, while Vernon and Miss Maltravers

were made much of. He knew it was absurd of him, he knew he was nobody, had done nothing as yet, that if he had anything in him he was still untried, not misunderstood or unappreciated, that he had no more claim to be invited to his manager's house than the driver of the omnibus on which he sat, and yet—it rankled. He pictured to himself the Fellowes's dining-room, with a long table lighted by rose-coloured lamps and covered with lovely flowers, at its head Mrs. Fellowes in all her radiant loveliness, and at her right hand—he almost ground his teeth as he thought of it—at her right hand Richard Vernon, the carelessly-happy, well-off, successful Vernon.

Then in bitter irony he remembered the Bell and Boot, his mother with her short skirts and serviceable thick-soled shoes, his

father with his clay pipe and hoarse voice, the red-tiled parlour, the low-ceiled, bare bedrooms, and the all-pervading smell of beer. And was his new home much better? Were not Lucy and Mrs. Mellon just about as far off being ladies as his old mother? Was the gulf between them and women such as Mrs. Fellowes not just as profound? A slight difference of degree, that was all. Hypatia Street was in reality as far removed from Cavendish Square as the Bell and Boot, and he loathed the idea of them both.

Meanwhile, just beneath his feet, poor Lucy and her mother were discoursing in whispers of his perfections, Mrs. Mellon assuring her daughter from her own heights of experience that it would not be long before George was making his two or three pounds a week. 'And then!' said Lucy meaningly.



CHAPTER XVIII

JEALOUSY

THE supper-party in Cavendish Square was very much as George had pictured it to himself, only that it was a good deal larger. His jealous fancy had only included Richard Vernon and Miss Maltravers, but besides these there were at least ten or twelve more. There was Saunderson of the *Universe*, Dalton of the *Kaleidoscope*, and several other dramatic critics, who, when they went away to write their copy with the bouquet of James Fellowes's wine still

lingering on their palates, and a fond remembrance of truffled turkey and that particular caviare you only got in Cavendish Square, were not unlikely to take a cheerful and tolerant view, to say the least, of the piece produced that evening at the Thespis. Mrs. Fellowes always did her duty by the critics, she feasted them royally, flattered them skilfully, and smiled on them irresistibly.

‘What a diplomatist you are!’ said Vernon this evening, after watching her melt by her graciousness an especially obdurate and not-to-be-cajoled journalist.

Helen slightly shrugged her shoulders.

‘That’s my part of the business, and so I do it as well as I can. Not that poor James ever asked me to do anything of the sort, but I always feel as if it were my duty.’

‘Do you always do your duty?’ asked Vernon absently.

Helen let her eyes rest upon his face for one second, and then looked down the table, at the end of which, flushed, stout, ungainly, but hospitable, sat her husband.

‘Oh dear no,’ she answered lightly, ‘certainly not. Life wouldn’t be worth living if one were as saint-like as all that—but just now and then, you know, for a change!’

‘You always make the worst of yourself, that’s a fact,’ said Vernon; ‘if one were to believe all you say of yourself one would——’

‘Come to the conclusion that I was a kind of fiend incarnate. Well, perhaps I am. Has my life been such a smooth one that it should have taught me anything else?’

She spoke with sudden passion, and a line of pain showed itself between her brows.

‘You are happy now,’ said Vernon; ‘you have everything a woman can want.’

‘Oh, of course,’ she said bitterly, ‘plenty to-day, and no care for the morrow, that is all a woman wants, isn’t it?’

‘Well, it’s enough for most of them,’ Vernon said.

‘Ah now, don’t try to be cynical,’ laughed Mrs. Fellowes, all shadow gone from her face. ‘You needn’t complain, you know women treat you well enough.’

‘That wasn’t the question,’ said Vernon, ‘and besides I don’t agree with you. The women I don’t care about are pleasant enough to me, but——’

‘How handsome Miss Maltravers looks to-night!’ interrupted Mrs. Fellowes. ‘I never saw her look better.’

‘Do you think so?’ rejoined Vernon indifferently, turning his eyes towards Miss Maltravers, who was at that moment watching the two with a curious expression on her face quite lost upon him.

‘Yes, and so do you, only you think it injudicious to praise one woman to another’s face.’

‘I never accused you of being guilty of any of the small meannesses common to most women,’ said Vernon in an undertone.

‘Didn’t you? How little you know about me, after all!’ retorted Mrs. Fellowes with a mock sigh.

And meantime Miss Maltravers, while replying with conventional politeness to her host’s rather laboured remarks, was hardly able to keep her eyes off the pair at the other end of the table. How handsome Vernon looked! And alas! how beautiful

Mrs. Fellowes was ! The actress's breast was ablaze with furious jealousy, she could hardly command her features as she noted Vernon's earnest glances and heard Mrs. Fellowes's gay laugh as it floated down the room. She firmly believed that, had it not been for Helen, Vernon would have been her lover at this moment. He had come so often to her house before Mrs. Fellowes had married, had stayed so long, had taken so great, so unfeigned an interest in all that concerned her. How good he had been to Prue ! Did not the child keep his photograph in her room, and treasure every gift he had ever brought her ? But it was a long time since he had come in the old friendly way. Now he paid only stiff visits, hardly lasting beyond the conventional twenty minutes, and with long intervals between each one. He was always

at this other woman's side, looking, as he was doing at this moment, into her false face, and listening to that eternal joking and laughter. What was James Fellowes about, to let his wife be made love to under his very eyes—did he not care for her any longer, was he indifferent to scandal? As she thought this she turned and looked at Mr. Fellowes. He happened at that moment to have his eyes fixed on his wife's face.

‘How well Mrs. Fellowes looks to-night!’ she said, almost in the same words that Helen had used about her a moment before. ‘She grows prettier and younger every day!’

‘Yes, doesn't she!’ answered her host warmly. ‘She is particularly bright to-night.’

‘She is always bright when Mr. Vernon

is with her,' Miss Maltravers could not refrain from saying. 'They suit each other so well.'

James Fellowes turned his eyes slowly upon her.

'Yes, Dick is a great favourite with us both,' he said quietly.

'You must take care, Mr. Fellowes,' she said, with a forced laugh. 'Dick Vernon is a dangerous man.'

'My wife is quite able to take care of herself, I think,' the husband answered in a tone which, calm as it was, warned the jealous woman that she had better go no further.

'Oh, of course, I was only joking,' she laughed.

'Of course,' repeated Fellowes. 'Tell me, how is Prue?'

She began telling him some of Prue's

latest witticisms, but she was hardly conscious of what she was saying; all the blood in her body seemed to be rushing up into her head, and after a moment she pushed back her chair and rose, muttering something about the heat of the room. Helen saw her movement, and came round to her quickly.

‘Come away to a cooler room,’ she said kindly, laying her hand on the actress’s arm. ‘You are over-tired, I expect.’

Miss Maltravers shook off the gentle touch with a violence that surprised Helen. She noted the bewildered look on her hostess’s face, and bethought herself that she was acting very foolishly and absurdly.

‘Yes, please, I should like to go to another room,’ she said, with a smile she could hardly compass.

‘Let me give you my arm,’ said another

voice, and Vernon was at her side, holding out his hand.

For one brief, despairing second she looked into his calm eyes, and read only polite interest there, then she took his arm, and, followed by her hostess and the other ladies present, left the room.

She had time, on the way up to the drawing-room, to chide and take herself severely to task. What had she been about? Did she want every one to read her secret—that secret no woman is proud of—to learn that she loved Vernon, and that Vernon did not love her? She wondered uneasily whether any one had noticed anything strange, forgetting, poor soul, that the most poignant miseries, the most heartrending tragedies, are just those which stalk past people undreamed of, invisible except to their victims. She sank

into a chair in the drawing-room, began fanning herself, and looked up at Vernon with the arch smile her admirers had so often seen from the footlights.

‘Weak woman, you see! Yes, thank you, Mrs. Fellowes,’ as her hostess asked how she felt, ‘I’m all right now. No, no Eau de Cologne, thanks; really, I’m quite well now.’

Mrs. Fellowes sat down beside her.

‘I’m afraid you were over-excited about the new piece,’ she observed.

‘I daresay I was,’ assented Miss Maltravers. ‘It’s always rather a trial.’

‘It must be. But you went splendidly through it. Was your little sister at the theatre?’

Miss Maltravers frowned and flushed. ‘I didn’t know you knew I had a little sister,’ she said roughly.

‘Oh yes, Mr. Vernon told me all about her some time ago,’ Helen answered. ‘I was very much interested. Both he and my husband say she is so clever. How old is she?’

‘Fifteen,’ replied Miss Maltravers, still ungraciously.

‘Oh, I thought she was younger than that. And was she at the play?’

‘No, she doesn’t care to go out. She’s deformed,’ said Miss Maltravers almost fiercely.

‘I know,’ Helen said softly. ‘Poor little woman! I wonder,’ she went on hesitatingly, as the repellent look in the other’s face gave her no encouragement, ‘I wonder if you would let me come and see her sometimes? I should so like to.’

‘Prue isn’t fond of strangers,’ said Miss

Maltravers, staring straight before her with her great melancholy dark eyes.

‘No? But perhaps she might take to me. Children’—diffidently—‘nearly always do.’

‘Prue isn’t a child,’ said the actress shortly.

Helen began to feel cross.

‘Isn’t she? Ah, there is Miss Leslie going. I must say good-night to her,’ and rising, she crossed the room, glad of a pretext for escaping from her very unamiable guest.

Left alone, Miss Maltravers began to bethink herself. Was it not certain that if Helen came to her house, some one else would come too? Had she not, just for the sake of indulging her own ill-temper, wilfully thrown away a chance of bringing Vernon nearer to her? She repented of her

uncourteous reception of Helen's offer, and presently, when she took her leave, she said with her sweetest smile,

‘Then I shall expect to see you some day soon, Mrs. Fellowes. Prue will quite look forward to meeting you, she has heard so much about you.’

And Mrs. Fellowes, while wondering what had caused the actress to be so uncordial a moment before, promised to come very soon.

Miss Maltravers drove home hating herself and all the rest of the world. She let herself into her silent house, where, in accordance with her orders, nobody ever sat up for her, and went straight to her own room, throwing herself down wearily upon the first chair with a half-muttered wish that she were dead. She had only been there a minute when a door leading out of

her room opened, and the oddest figure in white made its appearance, with fuzzy black hair, rumped until it stood up almost erect on its owner's head, a pinched white face with two dark eyes glowing strangely in it, a long nightgown whose scanty folds showed in all their cruel deformity the defects of the poor little body it covered, with eager skinny hands outstretched, Prue came hopping towards her sister.

‘You never came in to me, Gwen,’ she piped reproachfully. ‘I’ve not been to sleep, and I’ve been waiting and waiting.’

‘I was just coming, dear,’ answered her sister. ‘Only—I was so very tired that I sat down for a moment first.’

Prue gave a sudden leap into Gwen's lap, cast her arms round her sister's neck, and half smothered her with kisses.

‘And now,’ she said, unclasping her arms

and curling herself up, 'tell me all about the play and everything.'

Gwendoline tenderly stroked the stiff hair, and bending forward as she sat, caught up the quilted cloak she had been wearing, and wrapped it round the hunched-up little form.

'It all went off very well,' she said.

'*Oh!*' cried Prue, in a disappointed tone, 'you're not going to put me off like that. I want details, madam, details. Did you miss any of your cues?'

'No.'

'Good girl. Ah, little Mr. Fellowes knows who has the trouble of teaching you your parts! He ought to give *me* a salary. And did that stupid Beaumont know his part?'

'Yes.'

'Was there a good house?'

‘Very.’

‘Was the boss pleased?’

‘I believe so.’

‘Well, you *are* dull to-night!’ said Prue discontentedly. ‘I wouldn’t have stopped awake for you if I’d known what you were going to be like. Did you have a nice supper-party?’

‘Yes, very, thank you, dear.’

‘What did Mrs. Fellowes wear?’

Gwendoline paused to recollect.

‘Black lace, I think.’

‘Did she look pretty?’

‘Yes, very,’ said Gwendoline with an involuntary sigh.

‘Not as pretty as you, I know,’ said Prue with an air of conviction. ‘Was Mr. Vernon there?’

The sharp black eyes peered upwards into her sister’s face as she asked the question.

‘Yes,’ answered the actress.

‘Did he take you in to supper?’

‘Oh dear no!’ replied Gwendoline. ‘He took Mrs. Fellowes *of course*.’

Prue pondered a moment, then she said, with such energy that the cloak fell off her and slipped to the ground,

‘I hate that Mrs. Fellowes. She is a beast!’

‘Oh, Prue!’

‘Yes, she is. Do you suppose I’m a baby still, Gwen, or that I’m too stupid to see things? I have plenty of time to think, haven’t I? and I understand all about it. I know as well as you that the reason old Dick hardly ever comes here now is because he’s in love with that hateful woman, and doesn’t care about you any longer.’

‘Oh, hush, Prue!’ said Gwendoline, to whom the bitter truth seemed twice as

cruel coming with such precision of terms, and from her dearly-loved sister's lips.

‘Yes, I know it hurts to hear it said,’ answered Prue, glancing up with a wistful look; ‘but I wanted you to see that I knew. It seems to me very stupid that people have always got to be in love; but they always are in books, and so, it appears, they always are in real life. Do you suppose I shall ever be in love, Gwen?’

Gwendoline looked down with a pang at her heart keener even than her own trouble had given her.

‘My poor little Prue!’ she murmured, holding the misshapen figure more tenderly than ever.

Prue nodded sagely.

‘It would be unfortunate for me, to say the least of it!’ she observed dryly.

‘Well—never mind me, we were talking about Mrs. Fellowes.’

‘Mrs. Fellowes is coming to see you,’ said Gwendoline.

Prue started.

‘She sha’n’t! I don’t want her! I’ll hide in the coal-cellar.’

‘Oh, but you can’t do that. Probably Mr. Vernon will be with her, and he would soon hunt you up.’

‘I’ll put some poison in her tea!’ cried Prue fiercely.

‘I’m afraid you mustn’t do that either,’ said Gwendoline. ‘You must behave properly to her, or the discredit will fall upon me.’

Prue thought deeply for a few minutes, then slipped off her sister’s lap, kicked the cloak, with one adroit movement of her foot, from the floor into a low

rocking - chair, and running her fingers through her hair until it once more stood straight on end, said airily,

‘ Well, good-night, old Gwen ! You must go to bed, or you’ll look an awful fright to-morrow evening. I shall bring you your breakfast in the morning, so don’t you stir, or the first time Mrs. Fellowes comes I’ll set fire to the house, and disgrace you for ever.’

With which dire threat she waddled out of the room, her white draperies held jauntily about her.





CHAPTER XIX

FLIGHT

GEORGE was very nearly worked up into a state of frenzy by the time he escaped from the bosom of the Mellon family on the night of his *début*. The rich greasy supper and copious draughts of beer, the close room, and, worst of all, the interminable chatter of the two excited women—all this seemed to him odious in the extreme.

‘Come now, George!’ Lucy cried as soon as they had reached their underground

parlour, 'come and sit down and have a bit of something. He looks dead beat, poor feller, don't he, ma?'

'I think I'd rather go to bed,' George began feebly; but Lucy looked so genuinely dismayed, and the tears came into her eyes so quickly, that he thought he had better go through with it this evening.

'Look, George, here's a *lovely* pork-pie, and some of those pickles you're so partial to. Ma got 'em on purpose, didn't you, ma? Come, sit down and be jolly, do, there's a dear.'

She came round to him and put her arm across his shoulder.

'You ain't cross with me, are you, George?' she asked, looking fondly into his face. 'No one would think as we were an engaged couple,' she added coquettishly, 'to see the way you go on.'

Why, we might have been married for years !’

George kissed her—for he knew that was what she meant—in a wooden kind of way. She returned his caress fourfold and began to arrange his necktie.

‘I can’t get out of my head how well you did look this evening,’ she said, with loving flattery. ‘I expect Mr. Fellowes ’ll be very pleased with you. Quite likely he’ll raise your screw, and then we know what ’ll be possible, don’t we, dear?’

George kissed her again to save an answer, and then they sat down to supper, one of the party giving a regretful thought to that other supper table at which he would so much rather have been present.

Lucy was not so blind as to be unable to see that something was wrong with her lover. Although in the habit of giving

more than she got from him, she could not conceal from herself that his manner to-night was more than ordinarily cold and unresponsive. The little supper-party she had so looked forward to, had meant to be so jolly and lively, was as flat as ditchwater. What could be the matter with George? She looked wistfully at him, but his face wore a mask of heavy gloom, and the question died on her lips.

‘Vell, my children, you seem not over-gay!’ observed Mrs. Mellon with self-evident truth.

‘George is tired, ma!’ said Lucy quickly.

‘No, I’m not. I wish you’d leave off saying that, Lucy,’ snapped George crossly.

‘Your father ’ll be in soon,’ put in Mrs. Mellon, always anxious to preserve the peace.

‘I suppose Jarvis is out with him again,’ said Lucy.

Mrs. Mellon shook her head, pursing up her lips.

‘I suppose so. That young man is not near so steady as he was use to be.’

‘He keeps bad company,’ Lucy said.

‘Yes, your pa’s about the worst company that a young man could keep,’ answered Mrs. Mellon frankly. They had long ago ceased to make any effort at hiding Mr. Mellon’s shortcomings from George.

‘Did Mr. Mellon always go on the way he does now?’ asked George, more for the sake of something to say than because the subject interested him.

Mrs. Mellon poised a large piece of pork pie in mid-air reflectively.

‘He always was a thirsty man,’ she remarked, after sending her memory back through nearly thirty years.

‘*Thirsty!*’ said Lucy expressively.

‘Mild way of putting it, isn’t it?’ said George with a grim smile. ‘Hallo, here they are!’

A latchkey had been inserted in the lock upstairs, and the front door shut heavily.

‘And we might have all been in bed!’ observed Mrs. Mellon reproachfully.

‘Well, never mind, ma, as we weren’t,’ said Lucy cheerfully; ‘and for goodness sake don’t aggravate pa.’

‘My dear, I say nozing,’ returned Mrs. Mellon, closing her mouth as firmly as though she never intended to unseal it again.

Mr. Mellon and Mr. Jarvis lost no time in arriving on the scene. They made their entrance in a hurried manner, Mr. Jarvis sitting down with a thud on the chair nearest the door, and Mr. Mellon

arriving with a crash on the armchair opposite.

‘Good aim that!’ he observed, looking round with a fatuous smile, and instantly closing his eyes.

‘Why, what a lot of you there are here!’ said Mr. Jarvis slowly, blinking very hard.

Lucy burst into a shrill laugh.

‘Well, that’s a good ’un, ain’t it, George?’ she said. ‘How many of us do you see, Mr. Jarvis?’

Mr. Jarvis held up an unsteady finger, and pointed it at Mrs. Mellon.

‘One and one ish two, and four is five,’ he said; then, frowning very much, ‘and four is ten—no, that’s wrong. Lemme see!’

Mrs. Mellon rose, and swept the crumbs from her gown with an air of disgust.

‘Come, my children,’ she said loftily, ‘let us leave these two *shentlemen* alone.’

If they each of them can see two of themselves I am sorry for them.'

George was only too grateful to the two men for effecting this timely disturbance. He got up with alacrity, and followed the women upstairs.

'Good-night, dear,' said Lucy, pouting, 'it is a shame of pa and that beast Jarvis to come and break up our pleasant party, but anything's better than sitting downstairs with them. You ain't very vexed, are you, George?'

George assured her with perfect truth that he was not.

'Well, good-night, darling,' she said, with an affectionate embrace. 'When we've got our own snug, cosy little home, as we will have soon, it 'll be a very different thing, won't it?'

'Very,' said George, 'good-night. I hope

those two down there won't set the house a fire—on fire, I mean.'

'Oh, no fear, Jarvis ain't as far gone as all that,' answered Lucy reassuringly. 'He always puts his head into a basin full of cold water after he's been a little on like this, which, to do him justice, ain't often—and he always fills the basin too full and slops it all over on to the floor; at least, that's what ma says he does. I don't have nothing to do with him or his things, you know, so you needn't be jealous, dear.'

Jealous! As George wearily climbed the stairs, leaving his *fiancée* to attend to the locking-up, he thought to himself that he would give a good deal if there were only any just cause for jealousy of Jarvis. If Jarvis would only be good enough to make Lucy love him—what a relief it would be to George! But he recognised sadly the

utter impossibility of such a contingency. No woman who had once known and loved *him* could ever turn her eyes with affection on a Jarvis.

He went into his room, sat down on the little rickety chair at the foot of his narrow bed, took his head between his hands, and cursed the day he had come to Hypatia Street. What had he wanted to run his head into the noose for? He might just as well have stopped up yonder and married Sally Mills. He seemed to hear his mother's voice saying reproachfully, 'And Sally 'ev gotten brass, lad!' Yes, that was pretty nearly all the difference between Sally and Lucy. Sally had money and Lucy had none, and here was he tied to Lucy. Why had he not given out that he was engaged to be married, then Lucy would never have thought of him, or if she

had, poor girl, she would have buried her secret in her own breast. If he had only possessed a little foresight, an atom of common sense! He was born to be a gentleman; he had genius, he was raising himself fast, and at the very outset he had crippled himself. But—and here a look of determination crept over his features—he would cut his bonds; they were none of his tying, so much the more reason for severing them. At that moment the remembrance of the four pounds he owed Lucy and her mother flashed across him. He had forgotten his debt, and now it only came to him as an extra cause of complaint against Lucy. He supposed she had lent him the money, insisted upon lending it, so as to bind him faster still. Girls were so calculating! But that should be no hindrance. He would borrow the money from Dick Vernon to-

morrow morning, and make a clean finish of it all. With this resolution he undressed and got into bed.

He went as usual to read with Vernon next day, and after the lesson was over preferred a request for the loan of five pounds.

‘I’ll pay it back out of my screw at the Thespis, if you don’t mind taking it in instalments,’ he said with a smile.

‘That’s all right, old boy!’ returned Vernon, who was as generous now with his money as he had been with his toffee and tarts as a schoolboy, ‘any time ’ll do for giving it back.’

George thanked him, put the money in his pocket, and went away to look for a room. He found one in Burleigh Street, Strand, at the top of a house swarming with lodgers. The furniture was in the

last stage of shabbiness and dilapidation, the room even smaller than his own in Hypatia Street, the maid-of-all-work was frouzy and dirty, the landlady vulture-like and not over polite; but the price came within his small income, and he thought he could make it do until he could afford something better. Having paid a week in advance he returned to Hypatia Street, feeling that he had done a good morning's work.

‘Why, George!’ exclaimed Lucy, ‘what brings you back so early? I thought you were at the Museum!’

George came into the sitting-room, where Lucy sat at her work, and took his accustomed armchair.

‘No, I felt lazy to-day; and, besides, I wanted a chat with you,’ he said.

Lucy looked at him affectionately.

‘Dear old boy. Well?’

The room was intolerably close, and pervaded by the unpleasant odour of the haddock they had had for breakfast. Lucy was very busy, having a large order to complete and take to her employer that evening; she was making a mourning bonnet, and the black had come off on her hot fingers. She had pushed back her stiff curls from her forehead, and had left a dingy stain across it, which did not improve her appearance. At the present moment her mouth was full of pins, which obliged her to speak almost without opening her lips, screwing them to one side.

George regarded her steadfastly, and a feeling of resentment arose in his heart.

What! This common girl, who could comfortably endure such an atmosphere, whose mind was full of nothing but bows

and artificial flowers, considered herself fit to mate with him! It was really too absurd. He must tell her so some day soon; just at present, however, there was something else to be done. And first—

‘Here’s the money you lent me, Lucy,’ he said, laying down four sovereigns on the table.

Lucy stared at him with wide-open eyes.

‘My, George! Where ever did you get that from?’

‘I had a remittance from home,’ replied George.

‘You had no letter,’ said Lucy.

‘I gave my address at the theatre.’

Lucy took up the money, and dropped the coins one by one on the table. Then she put two aside, and held out the other two in the palm of her hand.

‘Ma ’ll want two for the rent,’ she said,

‘but the other two was my own, and I don’t want ’em, George—I don’t indeed. You keep ’em. There are so many little things you want. Some new shirts, for one, and boots and——’

But George put back her hand decidedly.

‘No, Lucy, you must take it back. And now don’t let’s say any more about money. I’ve something else to tell you.’

‘Mr. Fellowes has put you up!’ cried Lucy, jumping at the conclusion which seemed most natural to her.

‘Nonsense!’ said George impatiently. ‘Come now, Lucy, be sensible. You saw yesterday how late the play ended, didn’t you?’

‘Yes!’ answered Lucy, wondering whither her lover was tending.

‘And you know how far it is from here to Vernon’s, or to the Museum, don’t you?’

‘Yes,’ said Lucy again, letting her work fall into her lap.

‘Well,’ continued George, looking at the carpet, ‘you see, dear, it really is a long way. It’s expensive, and takes up a great deal of one’s time. A man should be near his work, you know. That’s why your father lives down here, so as to be near the Star, isn’t it?’

‘Yes,’ assented Lucy dully. She began to guess what was coming now.

‘Of course it’s dreadful for me, you being here and all, to have to move,’ said George, getting the word out at last; ‘but I’m afraid I must.’

‘Go away from here!’ repeated Lucy.

‘You see it’s impossible for me to live down here when my work’s right at the other end of the town—you see that, don’t you?’ said George a little impatiently.

Lucy turned her thimble round and round on her finger reflectively. Would her mother leave her father, she wondered, and come away to live with George and her? Mrs. Mellon was always saying she was going to leave her husband, but between saying and doing there is often a long way, as Lucy knew. And the thought gave her courage; she said,

‘Very well, George, I daresay you’re right. I suppose you *will* have to move—some time.’

And she added to herself that when that time came it would go hard with her if she did not manage to move too.

‘Some time!’ repeated George, lifting his eyebrows, ‘you don’t or you won’t understand me, Lucy. It’s now I must go, now, to-day.’

‘To-day!’ gasped Lucy.

‘Ay, to-day. I’ve—I’ve taken a room near the Thespis, and I’m going to move my traps just now.’

‘Ma!’ called Lucy hoarsely.

Mrs. Mellon was peeling potatoes in the kitchen, and came at once.

‘What, you here, George?’ she said surprised, ‘I did not hear you come in.’

‘He’s going, ma!’ said Lucy, ‘we’re not near enough to his work.’

‘Eh?’ cried Mrs. Mellon, looking from one to the other.

‘It’s just this way, missis,’ said George. ‘Hypatia Street is too far from the Strand. I’ve no right to be wasting my money on ’bus fares when every sixpence is of value to me. You’ve been very kind to me, and I’m very sorry to go, but go I must, and that’s all about it. Cheer up, Lucy, old girl,’ he added, ‘I can come and see you often enough.’

But Lucy sat with aching, miserable eyes fixed upon her mother.

The little woman laid upon the table the potato she had been peeling and the short-bladed knife, and began slowly to rub her hands together. Her sharp black eyes scanned George's embarrassed face narrowly.

'We lent you some money——' she began.

George drew himself up and pointed to the table. Lucy pushed the two sovereigns towards her.

'Oh, he's paid *that* back,' she said.

Mrs. Mellon's brow cleared. She saw in George's repayment the promise of honourable dealing in other matters.

'Well, Lucy,' she said, 'I don't see that he can help it. We shall miss him, but he can come to see us, as he says.'

‘Yes, ma!’ answered Lucy in a scarcely audible voice.

‘I don’t know what else I could do,’ observed George, feeling relieved that the women were taking it so quietly.

‘You might have given us a little notice,’ said Mrs. Mellon, with the faintest sound of reproach in her voice.

George coloured. ‘How could I?’ he asked. ‘It was not a pleasant thing for either of us. But of course I’m willing to pay——’

‘*George!*’ said Lucy, in a stifled tone.

Mrs. Mellon threw back her head the least bit, and her upper lip curled. She was a proud little woman in her way, although life had done its best to teach her how impertinent she was to expect anything but mortification and disaster from it.

‘Thank you,’ she said, ‘we will not talk any more about money.’

‘You began——’ muttered George.

‘That was the rent-money,’ said Mrs. Mellon stiffly, ‘that was not my own.’

‘Don’t quarrel with him, ma!’ said Lucy, ‘or perhaps we’ll never see him again.’

‘Now, Lucy!’ cried George.

But Lucy had had enough. She threw down her work and ran up to her own room.

‘Now look at that!’ said George in an aggrieved tone.

‘The poor girl loves you very much,’ said her mother gravely. ‘I hope you will be good to her, George.’

‘Of course I will—haven’t I been ever since I knew her?’

Mrs. Mellon’s lip gave a queer twist, but

she only picked up the potato and knife, and, remarking that she must see to her dinner, returned to the kitchen.

That evening George got into his dingy bed in Burleigh Street with a sensation of having neatly tided over a troublesome moment, and went to sleep with pleasant anticipations of the future, in which the inhabitants of Hypatia Street held but little share.

And meanwhile, down there in Hypatia Street, poor Lucy was sobbing with her face buried in her pillow and her head covered with the bed-clothes, so that her mother might not hear; and her mother, with bright black eyes looking anxiously out into the dark room, felt as if she could cry herself for sympathy with her child's present grief, and for the sorrow which her maternal heart vaguely told her was looming ahead.

Accustomed to look only at the surface of things, Mrs. Mellon had accepted Lucy's lover at Lucy's own estimate, and, from hearing a hundred times a day that George L'Estrange was the noblest and best of men, had come to believe that he really was so. Her naturally sanguine temperament, which had helped her to bear many a trial which might otherwise have broken her courageous heart, had easily led her to look at her daughter's future through rose-coloured spectacles. She had founded high hopes on George, and had done her best to make him satisfied and happy. She was able, however, to understand that there was a reasonable excuse for his wishing to leave Hypatia Street. It was certainly a long way from his work; and her frugal mind, while deploring the necessity which gave her child pain, could not but

applaud the economical spirit which led him to act as he did. Lucy must not be absurd. George was not going to the other end of the world, and would of course come and see her as often as was possible. And very soon they would be able to marry, and there would be an end of all her trouble.





CHAPTER XX

A COOL RECEPTION

ABOUT a week after the first night of the new play, Mrs. Fellowes's victoria with the two beautiful bays stopped at the garden door of Miss Maltravers's house in St. John's Wood.

Miss Maltravers was at home, and Mrs. Fellowes was shown into the little drawing-room opening on to the lawn, whose beds were now gay with flowers.

The actress, who was sitting in an arm-chair, apparently doing nothing, although

she had an open book on her lap, greeted her guest with sufficient courteousness, if not effusively.

‘It is good of you to come and see us,’ she said in her rather slow, finely-modulated tones.

‘And the little sister?’ asked Helen presently.

Miss Maltravers rang the bell, and requested the small page to ask Miss Prue to come downstairs.

‘Prue is sometimes awkward at first with new acquaintances,’ the actress observed; ‘you must excuse her if she should say anything odd to you.’

‘Of course!’ said Helen gently. ‘Have you always taken care of her?’

Miss Maltravers gave a quick look at her companion. ‘Always!’ she answered, and Helen wondered why she should

say the word so emphatically, almost fiercely.

Here the door opened, and Helen turned expectantly towards it, but nothing appeared but a Skye terrier, which dashed into the room, while a shrill voice from without cried, 'Rat, boy, rat!'

The dog rushed so frantically round and round that Helen's attention was completely taken up by it, especially as it seemed to be positive that the toe of her boot was the little animal in question. When it had quieted down and given over its search, Helen was startled by a chuckle just beside her. Looking round, she perceived a small figure seated in a low basket-chair close to her.

'I got in neatly, didn't I?' said Prue with a grin; 'you didn't see me, did you?'

‘Indeed I didn’t,’ answered Helen, smiling.

‘My sister Prue, Mrs. Fellowes,’ here put in Miss Maltravers formally.

Prue laughed.

‘All right, Gwen, I expect Mrs. Fellowes knows who I am. Still, I suppose it’s the thing to say “How do you do,” so——’

She held out her long thin fingers to Mrs. Fellowes, who even through her glove could feel that they were quite cold.

Just then there was a ring at the front door.

‘There’s Mr. Vernon,’ remarked Prue quietly.

She looked at Helen as she spoke, and Helen, to her annoyance, felt the colour rising to her cheek. In a moment the small page announced ‘Mr. Vernon.’

Vernon walked in, and was nervously

received by Miss Maltravers, who, now that she had got her wish, began instantly to feel that she was the most unhappy woman on earth.

Vernon sat down by Prue, saying,

‘Well, Prue? It’s a long time since you and I had a good dispute.’

‘Oh, you’ve grown too fashionable for us now,’ returned Prue with a wicked glance.

‘A poor actor like myself fashionable! That’s the first time I’ve heard of it,’ said Vernon.

‘Have you read *Robert Elsmere*?’ Prue asked, suddenly twisting round and addressing herself to Mrs. Fellowes.

‘Yes,’ answered Mrs. Fellowes, trying not to smile at this worn-out question cropping up again in so unexpected a quarter.

‘Do you like it?’ asked Prue, keeping her sharp eyes fixed upon her visitor’s face.

‘Ye—es,’ replied Helen. ‘Do you?’

‘Oh no,’ answered Prue with slow deliberateness. ‘It’s far too moderate for my taste. *I* am an atheist.’

But Prue had for once met her match.

‘Are you?’ said Mrs. Fellowes quietly.

‘Yes, aren’t you shocked?’

‘No,’ replied Helen smiling, ‘but I think you are trying to shock me.’

A gleam shot from Prue’s eyes.

‘Trying to shock you! Oh dear no!’ she returned in an indifferent tone, as though Mrs. Fellowes were far too insignificant a person to interest her. ‘I was only making conversation.’

‘Well, go on making conversation,’ said Helen. ‘I like it.’

‘One can’t talk to order,’ Prue said rudely.

‘No, one never can, can one? And talk-

ing to strangers is always difficult,' said Helen. 'What lovely flowers you have out there. Will you come out with me and show them to me?'

'Oh, do you want to see me walk?' asked Prue, frowning until her dark brows met. 'Do you want to see how I do it?'

'I suppose you walk very much the same as other people,' answered Helen smiling, for though inwardly dismayed, she was resolved not to be beaten.

'Yes, I look so exactly like other people, don't I?' sneered Prue.

'Well, will you come?' asked Helen.

'No, I won't.'

'Do you always receive your visitors like this?' asked Helen.

'Oh no, not always,' answered Prue, screwing up her mouth; 'people I like I am not rude to.'

‘And don’t you like me?’

‘No!’ returned Prue bluntly.

Helen felt annoyed. She had been so sure of her powers of fascination.

‘Why?’ she asked meekly.

‘That’s my secret,’ answered Prue; then looking over to where Vernon and her sister sat talking, she said, ‘Never mind, I’ll go into the garden with you, as you make such a fuss about it.’

Helen got up, and moved towards the window, carefully keeping her face averted, lest her strange companion should fancy that she was trying to see her. With an indiarubber-like bound the little hunch-back was beside her, and they passed out through the French window.

The flowers were duly admired, and then Prue volunteered to show Helen her chickens, which were kept at the end of the

garden. She stood silently looking at them until she suddenly exclaimed,

‘Hateful little wretches! Every one of them has got straight legs, and is just like all the rest. How I wish I were a fairy!’

‘So do I!’ answered Helen.

‘Yes,’ said Prue, craning her head to look up in her companion’s face. ‘I wish I were. I would change myself into you and you into myself in about a second.’

‘I’m not sure that it would do you much good to change with me,’ said Helen, smiling sadly.

‘Perhaps not, but it might some other people,’ answered Prue significantly.

‘Why, what do mean?’ asked Helen in surprise.

Prue nodded her head.

‘Never mind,’ she said, ‘I know what I know, and I mean what I mean.’

Helen felt immensely interested in this curious, sorely afflicted little creature. The very difficulty she found in winning Prue's liking made her the more anxious to obtain it. It never entered her head that Prue could have any possible reason for animus against her, she only thought that her strange behaviour was part of a general misanthropy by no means to be wondered at in a sensitive girl, so cruelly ill-treated by Nature. She determined not to be rebuffed, and tried a new subject.

'You ought to see how splendidly your sister acts in the new play,' she said; 'every one is raving about her.'

Prue's whole face kindled.

'So they might!' she exclaimed, drawing her poor little figure up with an almost ludicrous assumption of pride; 'so they might. Gwen is awfully clever. But it's

a horrid part,' she added disdainfully. 'Gwen has no business to be playing such rubbish. She ought to play Shakespeare only.'

Helen was not of the same opinion, but she would not contradict her fiery little companion, so she only said,

'Do you think so?'

'I am sure so,' answered Prue loftily, 'and I ought to know. No one knows Gwen as I do—no one knows what she can do but me.'

'Has she ever played any of Shakespeare's heroines?' asked Helen, thankful to have hit on a theme which Prue was apparently willing to discuss peaceably.

'Long ago she played Juliet,' answered Prue. 'How lovely she must have looked! But old Fellowes—I mean Mr. Fellowes—does not go in for Shakespeare.'

‘We must try and persuade him to,’ said Helen brightly. ‘And now I must be going. Will you come in with me?’

Prue waddled along by her side until they had nearly reached the drawing-room window, when a sudden thought struck her, and stopping, she said,

‘Here, you had better go out this way. It’s shorter than going through the house.’

‘But I must say good-bye to your sister,’ said Helen, amused at her companion’s peremptoriness.

‘Oh no, you needn’t. I can do that for you. It’s a pity to disturb them,’ she added, with one of her uncannily sharp looks.

‘Why?’ asked Helen laughing. ‘Are they talking business?’

‘Oh no,’ answered Prue, ‘not *business*.

Dick and Gwen have no business to talk about together.'

'Dick!' repeated Helen. 'Do you know Mr. Vernon very well then?'

'What?' cried Prue, raising her eyebrows. 'Know old Dick? Just a little, I *should* think. Why Gwen and he are——' she stopped just long enough to make the pause significant—'great, *great* friends.'

'Indeed,' answered Helen absently. She moved towards the house, however, and Prue fell behind, making a most hideous grimace at what she thought the ill-success of her stratagem.

Helen entered the room, and took leave of Miss Maltravers.

'Will you give me a lift, Mrs. Fellowes?' asked Vernon easily, certain that his request would be granted. Prue ground her teeth, but to his surprise Helen answered,

‘I’m afraid I’m not going your way.’

‘You can go into town with Gwen,’ put in Prue glibly.

‘Yes, of course, you are both bound for the Strand,’ said Helen with a smile.

‘How unkind!’ observed Vernon in an undertone as he put her into her carriage.

‘What?’ asked Helen with a perfectly blank face. ‘Will you say “Home,” please?’

‘And you said you were not going my way!’ said Vernon reproachfully.

‘Nor am I,’ answered Helen quietly. ‘I am going my own way.’

Her eyes met Vernon’s a little defiantly, then the bays moved swiftly onwards, and she was borne away.



CHAPTER XXI

EUREKA !

GEORGE installed himself with glee in his shabby new lodging. It mattered not to him that the landlady's ideas of cooking were distressingly primitive, nor that the general servant left grimy thumb-marks on every plate, cup, or glass. He did not feel inclined to be fastidious for the moment, he was far too glad to have escaped from Hypatia Street. Not one thought of regret did he waste on his clean, bright little room, so carefully arranged and

tended by loving hands, not once did he sigh for Mrs. Mellon's dishes, prepared with French art, and not once did he stop to remember what an empty place he had left behind him. He would doubtless have preferred not to cause Lucy any pain, but as things had turned out his doing so was inevitable, and he really did not see that he was to blame. It was not to marry Lucy Mellon and settle down into a milliner's husband that he had come to London, a fact that Lucy herself, he thought, should have been the first to recognise. He had come very near wrecking himself, but had pulled up in time, and now all that remained to be done was to break off matters with his too-affectionate *fiancée* as soon as possible. Burleigh Street, Strand, was a far more reasonable address for a rising man than

Hypatia Street, and as he did not intend to invite any of his acquaintances until he should be better off, no one need know how he lived. He had much to do; when he thought how much, he almost despaired. There was his career at the Thespis to be pushed, for he did not intend to stop at the first rung of the theatrical ladder; there was his self-education; and, lastly, there was his literary work. He had determined to write a play. Fired by the remark Mr. Fellowes had made the first night of the new piece, he had then and there resolved to turn dramatic author, and attempt to produce something original, which should owe nothing to foreign sources. Of course he knew that he was ignorant of many things necessary to dramatic production, but he felt that if he could only get hold of a good, novel

plot, and write some smart and stirring dialogue, the rest could soon be arranged. Either Mr. Fellowes, for whom he intended to write the play, would help him to put it in the proper form, or else he would find some collaborator for him who, as George in his innocence thought, would do what was necessary and leave him all the credit.

But the plot! There was the difficulty. George had seen hardly anything of the world, especially of life in the upper classes, and he had no idea of attempting to portray any other. Even on paper he wanted to get away from the people to whom he belonged by birth, and whose inner lives he knew and understood. He would not write a melodrama, with a stage-sailor for hero and a cotter's lass for heroine! Oh no! he aspired to the polite drama, drawing-room comedy, plush and

velvet, rapiers and ivory-mounted daggers, titles and jewels, the rustle of silks, and the soft sarcastic laughter of cultured voices—nothing else. But he was desperately afraid of betraying his social ignorance. What if he should make his characters do or say things that might reveal the mark of the Bell and Boot. It was not only the plot, it was the thousand and one little details, which were second-nature to a man like Vernon, for instance, but which George felt uncomfortably uncertain about.

Having made up his mind to write a play, however, he set about it in his own methodical, painstaking manner. He bought himself a book on social etiquette, which he studied carefully ; he went in for a course of novels written by titled ladies, whose descriptions of society might be

reasonably supposed to be correct; he also walked about in the Park, and in the fashionable squares and streets, patiently observing and taking mental notes of everything.

One morning, when he went to read with Vernon, he said carelessly,

‘Do you consider that a man wants much experience before he can write a good play?’

‘What sort of experience?’ asked Vernon.

‘Oh, all sorts. Literary and social.’

‘Well, I should say it depended a good deal on the man. There have been fellows who’ve written plays who couldn’t have had much experience of social life, except from literature. Reading, I should think, is about the best experience a man can have. But of course I don’t know very much about it. All I can say is that

Gervase, whose plays are each one a greater success than the other, has never had any personal experience of social life whatever, for he's been an invalid ever since he was a boy. Of course he has a most exuberant imagination.'

'So have I,' thought George, 'and I will take good care to use it.'

He went home and put away his bundle of poems, which, since he came to London, had been travelling from one publisher to another, to be rejected by all. He could publish at his own expense, they all politely informed him; but George, with a more intimate knowledge of his own affairs, knew very well that he could not as yet. He had been looking them over, pruning, touching up, rewriting, and generally fondling them, but now he put them at the very bottom of his box, resolving neither to

look at nor think of them any more until his play should be written. For a week he spent his spare time in wandering about, walking sometimes many miles, while he beat his brains for a plot.

With almost sublime self-confidence he had made up his mind to read no plays at all. He had not seen so very many, and he wanted to keep clear of all danger of unconscious reminiscences. The less he knew of other plots the more chance he had of evolving an original one for himself. So he thought and thought, rejecting one idea after another, until he had worked himself into a state of nervous exhaustion that made it positively painful to him to have anything to do with his fellow-creatures. He went through his little part every night, returning as soon as possible to his lodgings, or else setting out on one of those long,

solitary rambles, only coming home, utterly worn out, when the sun was already high in the sky, to throw himself on his bed, there to sleep fitfully and unrestfully for two or three hours.

He did not go near Vernon, nor did he visit Lucy during those days. Every faculty he possessed was concentrated on this one thing, he hardly remembered his friend's or his *fiancée's* existence.

On the Friday night he came home immediately on leaving the Thespis, too weary to go for a walk. He was accustomed to take his meals, except breakfast, at a small eating-house in the Strand, preferring this, after the first day or two, to his landlady's cookery. To-night he had not had courage to go into the close, crowded little shop, the idea of food sickened him, no less than the thought

of the noisy laughter of the boisterous *habitués* of the place. His brain was in travail ; until it brought forth there could be no intercourse with others for him. As he slowly went up the untidy stairs, he stopped and looked, apparently with the deepest attention, at a dingy door on the second flight. But he saw neither the dented brass handle nor the stains of time and uncleanness. An idea had come to him, come apparently without any volition of his own, come at a moment when he had been too tired to think at all ; the first feeble cry of his new-born infant had struck upon his ear just there, and the sound had seemed to stop the beating of his heart. Only for a few moments, however ; then, with a sudden dilatation and lighting up of his eyes, he threw back his head and dashed up to his room three

steps at a time. Panting as if from a race, trembling like a thoroughbred horse, he cast himself face downwards on his bed, and there, in the darkness of that sordid room, he listened to the voice within him.

After an hour or two he rose, lighted the candle, and bathed his head and face in cold water. A curious calm had come over him now, his movements were cool and deliberate. He drank a great draught of water, and then, taking his hat, stole downstairs, opened the door, which was left on the latch all night, and went out. The streets were quite deserted, the theatre lights were extinguished, the gas-lamps gave forth a strange and ghostly light in the dim gray morning. The air, cold with the breath of awakening dawn, struck fresh upon his face and damp hair as he walked

quickly in the direction of the Embankment. There he stood long, leaning on the stone balustrade, watching the sluggish water, opaque with many impurities, and smiling an absorbed smile every now and then. The sun rose, turning everything around him to beauty, gilding even the sullen ripples beneath his eyes, and chasing away the chill breeze of early morn. A coffee-stall man, wheeling up his barrow close behind him, began setting out his cups, and plates of cake and bread and butter. At the cheerful sound George looked round, suddenly conscious that he was hungry.

‘Fine mornin’, master!’ said the man, tying on his clean white apron.

Two or three working-men came up, evidently accustomed to make their early breakfast at this place. George had some

coffee and bread and butter, chatted freely, quite in his old sociable way, with the men, and then went home to his lodgings, where he got into bed and slept for hours, more soundly and sweetly than for many a night past.

It was characteristic of him that although he had now got his plot quite clear in his mind, he did not set to work upon it at once. He arranged with himself that he would make holiday on the Sunday, and start upon his play on Monday morning. He could afford to wait now. He even determined to put it quite aside until he should begin work ; he felt that he wanted rest, and intended to take it.

It is doubtful whether he would have given a thought to Lucy if he had not found a letter from her at the Thespis on getting there on Saturday night.

‘Dear George,’ it said, ‘you have never written us once since you went away. I am afraid perhaps you are ill. Ma and me has been missing you very much dear George. Dear George, if you are not ill, please come to see us on Sunday, if you are ill let us know and we will come and take care of you. With fond love and kisses from your own Lucy.’

Beneath were a number of little crosses, intended, as George well knew, for kisses. He thrust the letter into his pocket with a gesture of disgust and annoyance. The very last person he wanted to see or to have to think about was Lucy. He considered it exceedingly bad taste in her thus to force herself upon him. It was unwomanly, forward, bold! Could the girl not take a hint?

His good-humour all gone, he dressed

sulkily for his part. As he was going past her at the wings, Miss Maltravers said hurriedly,

‘Wait till I come off, I want to speak to you.’

‘I want you to come to us to-morrow evening,’ she said, when she came from before the curtain, after bowing to an enthusiastic audience. ‘Mrs. Fellowes and Dick Vernon and several more are coming, and Prue charged me with a special message for you.’

Poor Lucy! George never hesitated a second.

‘Thanks, I’ll come with pleasure,’ he said, and, going home, wrote a frigid little note to Lucy, saying he had work for the morrow which would prevent his going out.

‘She’ll get that on Monday morning,’ he

said, as he folded and put it into an envelope ;
'and it 'll be a good lesson for her. She
can't expect me to dance attendance on her
just whenever she chooses.'





CHAPTER XXII

TROUBLES

GEORGE arrayed himself carefully the following evening in his new dress suit, a thrill of satisfaction passing over him at the thought that he had paid back Lucy's money, and had therefore cancelled the obligation under which she had laid him. He had also returned Mr. Mellon's gorgeous studs, which he had replaced by some aluminium ones bought at a cheap jeweller's in the Strand. It was significant of his advance in worldly knowledge that these

new studs were perfectly plain. The jeweller had shown him some others with small brilliants which were very little dearer; but although he admired them greatly, and, if he had consulted his own personal taste, would have preferred them, he shook his head and took the plain ones. His gaudy ring had also disappeared, but his funds had not permitted him to replace it. There was no one this time to brush his clothes and to polish his patent shoes with milk, but he did it himself quite as carefully, and with quite as good results. He chafed at the necessity of taking an omnibus. How hard it was to be obliged to think of every penny, to have one's soaring, aspiring mind continually brought down to sordid earth with its trumpery miseries! He felt more and more that he had somehow been born out of his proper sphere, that Nature

had never intended him to waste his energies in the desperate scramble for mere existence, like any of the common mortals about him, that she had meant him to be her favourite, had endowed him richly and set him apart, and then — had lost sight of him and left her work incomplete.

He looked at the man who was sitting opposite him in the omnibus, a white-faced, anxious-eyed creature, whose threadbare clothes and pinched features bore witness to his ineffectual struggle against the demon Poverty; his lack-lustre eyes were fixed straight in front of him, he neither stirred nor looked when a fresh passenger entered the vehicle, his lips opened occasionally with a loose movement of his retreating chin; in one narrow, work-worn hand he held the coppers for his fare.

‘A mechanic,’ thought George, ‘who has

passed so many hours daily at his work that he has become stupefied, who has exhausted his body in ceaseless toil just for the privilege of keeping alive so that he may suffer, who, taking no solemn warning from his own misery, has probably three or four children in the hole he calls home, to whom he will bequeath the same intolerable burden. Unhappy wretch—but he knows no better. His features are weak, stupid, dull. He is only capable of a certain amount of suffering, his nerves are not sensitive or highly strung. He is like the cab-horse, which starts off as soon as it feels the bit in its mouth, it knows not whither nor wherefore. His feelings are less acute than mine, his is altogether a lower form of organisation. Even if he envies, it is but in a brutish way, he longs either to drink his fill, to eat his fill, or to sleep his fill—

further, nothing. I am sorry for him, but for myself I am sorrier, oh, how much sorrier !'

These reflections carried him to his destination. He bemoaned his fate again as he stooped at the door of Miss Maltravers's house, and carefully flicked the dust from his shoes. To his dismay, Prue opened the garden door before he had finished. Her quick eyes saw in a moment what he was about.

'Here, let me do that,' she said briskly, suiting the action to the word. 'I'm nearer them than you are.'

George got very hot, and wished the officious little helper miles away.

'I was in the garden just inside the door,' she explained, 'and heard some footsteps come up and stop, so I thought perhaps it was some one trying to find the bell. Come along in, they're all there.'

George followed her, wondering whether she would tell her sister about his dusty shoes, and whether they would laugh at him together. He need not have been afraid. Prue thought his coming on foot and dusting his shoes the most natural thing in the world, and forgot all about it immediately.

In the drawing-room, besides a number of people, some of whom George knew, and others whom he did not, were Mr. and Mrs. Fellowes and Vernon. The latter, as soon as he caught sight of George, came up to him, saying gaily,

‘Well, truant! Where have you been all the week?’

George muttered something about having been seedy.

‘Yes, you don’t look well, old boy,’ said Vernon kindly; ‘better knock off work for

a bit, or else we shall have you breaking down.'

'Does Mr. L'Estrange work very hard?' asked Helen, who was sitting close by where the two men were standing.

'I should think so!' returned Vernon; 'he's always going to the Museum to read, and does I don't know what besides.'

Helen began to talk to George, and Vernon moved away.

Gwendoline's eyes were following him, painfully conscious of his every movement. She knew he was in love with Mrs. Fellowes. Careful though Vernon was, complete as was the control he possessed over himself, Gwendoline loved him far too well not to realise that she was nothing to him and Helen everything. Was there any guilty secret between the two? That, she felt, she could not tell. Helen was perfectly

at ease always, even Gwendoline's jealousy could detect no signs of mutual understanding between them, but that meant nothing. Helen was a clever woman and a proud one, and would not be in the least likely to betray herself. Gwendoline looked towards Fellowes, who was standing in the doorway talking to an actress. Did he know, she wondered? Had he ever seen Vernon's eyes light up at the sound of Helen's voice, even when she was speaking to some one else? Had he ever noticed Vernon's restlessness and inattention when his wife was out of sight and hearing? Was Fellowes aware of their frequent meetings? Did he imagine that he, middle-aged, ill-favoured, vulgar as he was, could hold his wife's young heart against so handsome, so accomplished a wooer as Vernon?

Gwendoline had but a poor opinion of

both men and women. Certain passages in her life bade her mistrust fair looks and soft speeches. She thought it quite within the bounds of possibility that Helen was deceiving and tricking her husband, and that Vernon was betraying the man who was so often his host, and who called him friend. Hot waves of passion swept over her as she stood smiling and chatting lightly with the friends around her. Why should this woman, who had so much, just fix upon the one man to whom she herself had given her love? And yet—had she any right to expect love of any man? Was she as other women are? Her eyes grew sombre and her teeth set hard as she remembered. Involuntarily her hand went to her side; but the next moment she had turned round, and was asking some one to sing.

Prue, meanwhile, was watching Helen almost as jealously as her sister. She saw that Helen was beautiful and charming, she saw how all eyes turned to her with admiration, and she felt that she hated her. Hated her blindly, unreasoningly, simply because she stood in her beloved sister's way. Prue never stopped to think whether Helen were married or not, it mattered not to her whether treason were or were not being committed against James Fellowes, all she cared about was her sister. Her sister loved Vernon—so much she knew, although Gwen had never actually confessed it to her. Helen had made Vernon love her, instead of leaving him free to turn to Gwen, and therefore Prue hated her. She pondered, as she looked at her, what she could do to hurt Helen.

‘I would do anything, *anything*,’ she thought, clenching her thin hands tight. ‘I would kill her if I could, and if only it would not do Gwen any harm. How blind men must be to look twice at her silly pretty face when there is my beautiful stately Gwen to look at instead! There is Mr. L’Estrange gazing into her eyes as if he expected to find pearls and rubies there!’

‘Why, how fierce you look, Prue!’ said a laughing voice, and Vernon sat down on a low chair beside her. ‘Are you thinking of wreaking deadly vengeance on any one, that you scowl so forbiddingly?’

‘Perhaps!’ answered Prue.

‘Not on me, I hope,’ said Vernon lazily.

‘Who knows?’ Prue remarked.

‘O enigmatic Muse!’ said Vernon, ‘unfold to me the meaning of these dark hints.’

‘Certainly not,’ replied Prue.

‘You consume me with curiosity!’ said Vernon.

‘You would be consumed with something else if I could do what I was thinking about!’ thought Prue, but was silent.

‘And how does the violin get on?’ asked Vernon presently.

Prue frowned.

‘I’ve smashed it up!’ she answered shortly.

Vernon opened his eyes wide.

‘Smashed it up?’ he repeated. ‘That lovely violin your sister gave all that money for!’

‘Smashed it up,’ returned Prue.

‘What on earth did you do that for?’

‘Because I chose.’

‘That of course, most high and mighty damozel, but for what other reason?’

‘It was a beast—it wouldn’t play.’

‘You mean——’ began Vernon, but affected to stop short.

‘No, I don’t,’ answered Prue. ‘The violin was a beast. I sha’n’t ever learn to play on such a ridiculous instrument.’

‘Try the bones,’ suggested Vernon.

Prue’s eyes flashed.

‘Oh yes! You’re thinking how pretty and graceful I should look playing them, aren’t you?’

‘I was not,’ answered Vernon, who knew from long experience how to treat her; ‘but I will, if you like. Anything for a quiet life!’

‘What an ugly frock Mrs. Fellowes has got on!’ said Prue, out of pure devilry.

‘Think so?’ answered Vernon indifferently.

‘Yes, I do,’ replied Prue decisively.

‘But then I think all her things ugly. She hasn’t an atom of taste.’

‘I’ll tell her you say so,’ said Vernon.

Prue tossed her head.

‘You can if you like,’ she said. ‘I shouldn’t care a bit. I don’t like Mrs. Fellowes.’

‘Indeed!’ said Vernon, with the slightest possible contraction of his eyebrows. ‘And may I ask what she has done to fall under the ban of your august displeasure?’

‘Oh, you needn’t mock at me!’ returned Prue, looking into his face with an angry glitter in her deep-set eyes. ‘I’m not a bit sensitive. You can use as many grand words as you please. I hate Mrs. Fellowes.’

‘But why don’t you tell Mrs. Fellowes so,’ said Vernon, ‘instead of selecting me for your confidant?’

‘How funny we are!’ sneered Prue.
‘All right, ostrich.’

‘Why ostrich in particular?’

‘Oh, because you’re so like one. Don’t you know what an ostrich does?’

‘Lays eggs?’

‘Ah, but besides that? Don’t you know how an ostrich sticks its head in the sand, and then thinks no one can see it?’

‘I was aware that there was a legend to that effect about the ostrich,’ replied Vernon; ‘but I still fail to see how it can apply to me.’

‘Well, never mind. I know what I mean,’ answered Prue, not daring to give further rein to her ill-temper, for she had no wish to offend Vernon so that he would not come to the house.

‘Strange little creature!’ thought Vernon, as he watched the deformed girl

move away down the room. 'What was she talking about, and why should she say she hated Helen? What can poor Helen ever have done to her?'

He sought out Helen where she still sat talking to George. George was animated, and was talking fast.

'What a good-looking fellow he is!' thought Vernon, 'and how soon he has learned how to make himself look like a gentleman! I'm glad I didn't turn a deaf ear that day he spoke to me at the restaurant. I might have missed the chance of doing him a good turn, and I should have been sorry, for he's a plucky beggar, and too good to be thrown away. How lovely she looks! Oh, why, why wouldn't she have me long ago! I could have made her so happy, so much happier than poor old Jim Fellowes!'

And with a heavy sigh he rose and went to talk to the man whom, more than any other creature on earth, he envied the good the gods had sent him.





CHAPTER XXIII

AN ANXIOUS PARENT

IT was with Mrs. Fellowes's voice ringing in his ears, with the glamour of Mrs. Fellowes's beauty strong upon him, that George went away from Miss Maltravers's house that Sunday evening. Thoughtless now of his shining shoes, he set out to walk back to the Strand, for once oblivious of his surroundings. Obligated in her own house to attend to her duties as hostess, Helen had never been able to give him so much of her time before. He had seen that she was very

beautiful, he had known that she was greatly admired, but he had never been brought so directly face to face with her personal charm. She had completely captivated him to-night. For some reason best known to herself she had kept him beside her nearly the whole evening, a willing captive, only too ready to confide to such lovely and sympathising ears all that concerned himself.

Almost without knowing how, George had found himself telling her about his play; how the ambition to write one had suddenly laid hold of him, how he had wandered about day after day seeking a plot, how it had come to him like a flash of lightning, and what the plot itself was. She had listened with absorbed interest, had made him come with her to the quietest corner of the room, where they could not

be disturbed by the music, and had drawn him on with all her especial womanly skill to pour forth his whole heart to her. It had seemed to him that they had been quite alone that evening, he and she, in the softly-lighted, fragrant room. He would for ever think of her as his inspiring angel, the goddess of his play. The laurels that were waiting for him should be laid at her feet, she should be his Laura, his Beatrice.

Mingled with his poetic dreams was a shrewd consciousness that it would not be at all a bad thing for him to have the ear of the manager's wife. He was too acute not to have made his own observations, and he had seen from the first that James Fellowes was devotedly fond of his wife, while she apparently cared but very little for him. Mr. Fellowes could refuse her nothing, of that George felt convinced; and his play,

approved of and protected by her, ran a far better chance of a favourable reception than if presented by himself alone.

He had asked Helen's permission to read her the first act as soon as it should be written, begging her frank and unreserved criticism, a request to which she had at once acceded with a gracious smile which had made him feel like a conquering hero already. Here was a woman who could help him on his upward path, a cultivated, clever woman, who could teach him those things which he could learn from no books, and which he so much longed to know. He gave a scornful thought to Lucy Mellon. How absurd he had been ever to associate with such a person! How wise he had been to cut himself free from her! For he considered himself free, or, rather, he considered that he had never been bound. If

romantic milliners will fling themselves at a poet's head, it surely is not the poet's fault. He had lately been reading Swift's life, and now he made a mental comparison between Lucy Mellon and Vanessa. Mrs. Fellowes should be his Stella, to whom he would be—more or less—faithful all his life. The importunate and too-fond Vanessa must shift for herself. It was one of the penalties of greatness, of genius, to be too often and too much loved—Goethe was another instance. He would go and see Lucy at intervals, for a time at least. He had no wish to drive her to despair, but little by little she must be brought to understand the extreme, the outrageous incompatibility that existed between them. The friend, the adorer of Helen Fellowes could never be the lover of Lucy Mellon.

He wished that Dick Vernon would get

an engagement in Australia, or go on an American tour, or something of that sort. Mr. Fellowes was nobody, he didn't mind him; but he knew that Vernon was a sort of tame cat in Cavendish Square, and it would be very disagreeable to have him always coming worrying in, just when he was reading to Helen, or when they were seriously discussing improvements in the plot of his play. He was sure that Vernon was in love with Helen, the gossip at the theatre and Vernon's own great reticence on the subject left little room for doubt about it, but he was not at all so certain that Helen cared for Vernon. He did not believe—principally because he did not choose to believe—that Mrs. Fellowes could forget her marriage vows in favour of a man like Vernon. An empty-headed fool, whose only merit was that he was good-looking

and held himself well ! Mrs. Fellowes was kind to him, of course, he was a friend of her husband's, and very likely he himself interpreted her kindness in the manner most favourable to himself, but further there was nothing in it. It was utterly impossible that an intellectual woman like that could waste her affections on a fellow who cared about tennis, and was passionately fond of boating. Ah, if Vernon had been a man like—well, say himself, for instance ! Here a little shiver ran through George, and he quickened his pace. Well, and why not ? Why shouldn't she, though she couldn't care for Vernon, care for him ? Platonically, of course, and all that kind of thing. It would be very pleasant and very safe, and—very useful.

With this thought he arrived at his own door, and, still building his air-castles higher and higher, went straight to bed.

There was no rehearsal next morning, and having told Vernon the evening before that he would not come to him for a time, as he had some writing he wanted to get through, he had his day to himself. He set to work with eagerness, but did not get on as well as he had expected, small but harassing difficulties, arising from his inexperience, continually erecting themselves in his path. He went to the theatre in the evening in anything but an amiable temper, and when, on coming out after his part was over, he found Mr. Mellon waiting for him at the stage-door, he could hardly command himself to speak to him.

‘You here?’ he said, in a most discouraging tone.

But it took a good deal to abash Mr. Mellon.

‘Yes, it’s me!’ he answered airily, giving

an extra button to his tight drab overcoat, and then tucking his walking-stick under his arm, he held out both hands to George. 'Yes, it's me! They couldn't do without news of you any longer at 'ome—Lucy said she was sure you was ill—and so, as the Star's shut for repairs, I says, well, I'll go and look him up, and so 'ere I am, and 'ow are you, my boy, 'earty?'

Although this speech was delivered with a great assumption of ease and *bonhomie*, George, who knew his man well, could easily detect that Mr. Mellon in reality felt far from comfortable.

'I'm perfectly well, thanks,' he said coldly, and standing still. 'As I wrote Lucy on Saturday, I'm busy, and can't get down to Hypatia Street.'

'Yes, but I say—you know,' began Mr. Mellon feebly, 'I say!'

‘Well?’ said George.

Mr. Mellon looked up and down.

‘I—I can’t talk to you here,’ he said.

‘Come in somewhere and have a drink.’

‘No, thanks,’ said George, in his grandest and most southern accent.

‘Well then, let’s go to your place. I—I want to talk to you, d’ye see?’

‘I’m very busy.’

‘I sha’n’t keep you long.’

‘And—I’m going out,’ said George, seizing without much reflection on the first excuse that presented itself. He saw his mistake the next instant.

‘The deuce you are!’ cried Mellon, thumping down his stick on the pavement before him. ‘Going out—and can’t spare a minute for my little gal, or for her old father. Can’t you? We’ll see about that.’

‘Hold your tongue, will you?’ said George, low and savagely, gripping the other’s arm tight. People were beginning to come out now, and already one of the supers had turned round to look at them curiously.

Mellon, who was perfectly sober for once, saw that he had made a step in the right direction.

‘‘Old my tongue, eh? No, by G—d, what should I ‘old my tongue for? *We* ain’t done nothin’ to be ashamed of, we ain’t—neither me nor Lucy.’

‘Oh, come along!’ groaned George, dragging him away by the arm which he still held. ‘Come out here, and we’ll have some supper, or something.’

‘Oh, I’m agreeable!’ said Mellon jovially. ‘*I* don’t mind talkin’ in a public place. I’ve got nothin’ to be ashamed of.’

George was in agonies. What was he to do with this brute? Suppose Vernon or Miss Maltravers should see him arm in arm with so shady-looking an individual, what would they think? He cast about for a means of escape, but Mellon clung firmly to him, repeating, always in a louder key, that *he* had done nothing to be ashamed of, and was evidently determined not to be shaken off, either by fair means or foul. At last George, driven to bay, took his resolution.

‘You’d better come to my lodgings,’ he said. ‘We shall be quieter there.’

‘With all my ’eart, dear boy, with all my ’eart,’ answered his tormentor with a foxy smile, and, leaning familiarly on George’s arm, he walked down the brilliantly lighted street with him.

George breathed more freely when they

had turned out of the noisy thoroughfare into the comparative quiet of Burleigh Street. He led his companion to the house he lived in, and opened the door with his latchkey.

‘So it’s ’ere you perch, eh?’ said Mr. Mellon, who had carefully noted the name of the street and the number of the house. ‘Snug little place, ain’t it? I shall often look you up ’ere.’

Mentally resolving to give his landlady notice the very next day, George preceded his unwelcome guest upstairs.

Mr. Mellon entered the by no means sumptuous apartment, and looked about him with a supercilious air.

‘H’m! Well, I can’t say I think you’ve changed for the better!’ he remarked with a sniff. ‘Hypatia Street is ’umble, but, by gosh, it’s Buckin’am Paliss itself compared to this—it is, by gosh.’

‘Yes, it’s not so comfortable as my old room,’ agreed George, lighting his solitary candle.

Mr. Mellon sat down recklessly in the one dilapidated armchair, which instantly sent forth a loud and warning creak of remonstrance.

‘I never rightly understood,’ he began, spreading a fat crimson hand, enclosed in its tight wristband, on either round and podgy knee. ‘I never rightly understood why you left our diggin’s.’

‘Too far from the theatre,’ said George, who had routed out his only tumbler, and was looking for something to put into it. He found the bottle in which he kept a pint of whiskey, replenished at the public house at the corner whenever it was empty, and proceeded to mix Mr. Mellon a glass, stiff enough, he hoped, to render him less

belligerent, if not wholly oblivious of his hostile errand.

Mellon, however, was pretty well seasoned. George's jorum was as mother's milk to him, serving simply to whet what intelligence he possessed. He sipped, took a draught, smacked his lips, and returned to business.

'Too far from the theatre—that was it, was it?'

'That was it,' said George impatiently.

'You do seem to find it a good long way,' observed Mr. Mellon, holding his tumbler between himself and the candle, and gazing at its transparent contents with one eye shut.

George not thinking it necessary to answer this last remark, his visitor presently observed,

'My Lucy's a pretty gal.'

‘She is,’ answered George readily.

Mellon raised his head and looked at him fiercely.

‘I said a pretty gal, sir, and I say it again. She’s a pretty gal—and a good gal too, by gosh.’

‘I’m sure she is,’ said George blandly.

Something in his unconcerned tone seemed to infuriate Lucy’s father. Putting his glass down, he rose to his feet, clenching his fists, and crying out,

‘She’s a good gal, and I’m her father, and I won’t ’ave ’er played with, curse you, you villain—she’s bin cryin’ all day and all night ever since you took your ugly self off, and I’m damned if I stand it any longer! You just come back with me and marry her, or, by gosh, we’ll see if there isn’t any law in the land!’

He snorted and puffed like a furious bull

as he spoke, his little eyes started, and every vein in his neck swelled.

‘Sit down, my dear fellow, sit down,’ said George with extreme quietness. ‘There’s no need to get so hot. No one’s going to do Lucy any harm. You misunderstand me altogether.’

Thus adjured, Mr. Mellon let himself down into his chair again, still breathing hard and staring angrily at George.

George felt vastly and consolingly superior to this vulgar, besotted boor, who, as he knew perfectly well, cared not a rap for the daughter he was making such an uproar about. It was with an amused twist of his mouth that he said, still in his contained, gentle voice,

‘I don’t quite understand, Mr. Mellon, what it is that you are accusing me of. What harm have I ever done to Lucy?’

You know very well that I am in no position to marry. How could I take your daughter away from her home, and bring her to share—this?’

He made a theatrical sweep with his arm, demonstrative of the barrenness of the land. Mellon said nothing. His breathing had calmed somewhat, but his eyes were still fixed on his host's face.

‘Lucy wouldn't leave her mother, even if she would consent to share my poverty,’ went on George. ‘And what should I do, how could I support them both? Lucy has her work, no doubt, but there might be a time when she would not be able to work, when another mouth would want food, and what then?’

He paused for a reply, but none came. Mr. Mellon stared hard.

‘And you,’ said George, sinking his tone

still lower, and letting his voice shake with suppressed emotion, 'you yourself. Why should I rob your home of its light?'

This very delicate allusion to the chief bread-winner in his home appeared to touch Mr. Mellon. He gasped, stretched out his hand for his tumbler, swallowed its contents slowly, set it down, and after wiping his mouth with the back of his hand observed,

'Ar, I hadn't thought of that!'

'But I had!' said George dramatically.

Mr. Mellon leaned forward and touched George's knee with his cushiony forefinger.

'Do you mean straight by my gal?' he asked.

'Of course I do!' answered George warmly.

'Then it's all O. K. and I'm off,' said Mr. Mellon, rearing himself up and taking his

stick. 'I only thought I'd make sure, you see. No offence, I 'ope.'

'Certainly not,' said George. 'Tell Lucy I shall come and see her one day very soon—Saturday, most likely, or else Sunday.'

'I'll tell her. Ta-ta, my boy!' replied Lucy's father, making for the door. When he had got there he turned and said,

'Oh, by the way, dear boy, I wouldn't inconvenience you for the world, and it's of no consequence, but if you could let me have that half-crown you borrowed off me last Tuesday fortnight—you remember?'

'Old villain!' thought George, but he handed over the amount of his imaginary loan, glad at any cost to be rid of his obnoxious visitor, and with a 'Thanks awf'ly, dear boy,' Mr. Mellon shut the door after himself, and stumped heavily downstairs.



CHAPTER XXIV

GOOD-BYE, SWEETHEART

ALTHOUGH George was too much occupied to find his way to Hypatia Street, he managed to spare time for a visit to Miss Maltravers, half hoping to meet Mrs. Fellowes. She was not there, however, and Miss Maltravers herself was out, so that Prue was his sole entertainer. He was not altogether sorry, for Miss Maltravers with her sombre, tragic moods rather bored him, while Prue, on the contrary, was always entertaining. Ben,

the small page, had shown him into the drawing-room, thinking his mistress might be at home, but the room was unoccupied, save for the ungainly form screwed up in a large armchair, with a book upon its knee.

‘Oh, that’s you, is it?’ said Prue, looking up, but not troubling herself to move. ‘Did Ben tell you Gwen was at home?’

‘He did.’

‘Just like him! But she isn’t. She’s gone to a concert, for once in a way. I’m sorry, you’ll have to put up with me.’

‘I hope I’m not disturbing you,’ said George, sitting down near her.

‘No, I don’t mind,’ answered Prue condescendingly. ‘I’m only reading.’

‘Anything very interesting?’

She tossed the book over to him. It was Dickens’s *Our Mutual Friend*.

‘I’ve read it before, of course,’ she said.

‘But I like to look it over every now and then, just to make sure I’m not degenerating into a book-hunchback. Jenny Wren, you know,’ she explained in answer to George’s bewildered look, ‘Jenny Wren, the doll’s dressmaker, the girl something like me, only with beautiful golden hair. Nobody can accuse me of *that*, at all events,’ she said in a tone of satisfaction, shaking her dark fuzzy head.

‘I think you worry a great deal too much about yourself,’ said George.

Prue grew red. ‘Perhaps I do,’ she answered, twisting her thin fingers together. ‘But you can’t understand, no straight person can, I suppose, how very disagreeable it is to be like me. I often think my mind must be as crooked as my body, because I have an awful lot of trouble with myself. I should like to know another

hunchbacked person, so as to compare notes—but there are so few of them. I can't forget about myself, you see, because every fresh man or woman that comes into the house reminds me of myself. They either stare, so as to make out just where I'm made wrong, or else they affect not to look at me at all, so as not to hurt my feelings. I don't know which is worse. That's why I like you,' she said with a nod at him, 'because from the very first you always looked perfectly naturally at me.'

'I'm glad you like me,' said George, flattered.

Prue gave him a shrewd glance.

'Perhaps you wouldn't be quite so glad if you knew some of the other reasons,' she said knowingly.

'Tell me some,' requested George.

'Well you mustn't be offended,' said

Prue, her pointed features seeming actually to sharpen still more with malicious glee. 'I like you besides because I know that you and I have a sort of fellow-feeling. I know we are both very wicked.'

She paused in evident enjoyment of so grand a statement, looking at George with half-closed eyes.

'Both very wicked!' repeated he in astonishment. 'Dear me, how did you find all that out? What have I ever done, or you yourself, to be so described?'

'We mayn't have done much yet,' answered Prue complacently, 'but that's only because we haven't had any opportunity. I know I'm wicked, because—oh, first because I'm deformed, and so it's in my rôle, and secondly, because—well, because I know I am. And you—I can't tell you

exactly why, or how I know it, but I'm sure you are.'

'That's very unfair !' said George.

'Not a bit,' replied Prue. 'You wait and see. You and I are wicked, just as Gwen and Dick Vernon are good.'

'Oh, Dick Vernon's good, is he ?' said George with a sneer.

'Yes,' answered Prue. 'Dick Vernon's good. He's one of those stupid good people who do wrong things just because they *are* good. But there's one person who puzzles me. I haven't known her very long, however, and women are always more difficult to get at than men.'

'Mrs. Fellowes ?' guessed George.

'Right !' nodded Prue. 'You see, you know just what I mean. Yes, it's Mrs. Fellowes. I can't quite make her out. Can you ?'

‘I think she’s very charming,’ said George, his eyes wandering to the corner of the room where Mrs. Fellowes and he had held so delightful a conversation a few evenings before.

‘Oh! *charming!*’ returned Prue impatiently. ‘How tired I am of that word! That’s what everybody says of everybody else—except of me, I expect. Anyhow, whether I understand Mrs Fellowes or not, I’m sure of one thing about her, and that is, that I detest her.’

‘Do you, why?’

‘Because,’ said Prue, more frank with him than she had dared to be with Vernon, ‘she’s taken one of our best friends away from us. Dick Vernon used so often to be here, and Gwen and I were so fond of him; but since Mrs. Fellowes came to England we hardly ever

see him. You know him very well, don't you ?'

'Yes,' answered George, 'I know him very well.'

'Well then,' said Prue slowly, 'couldn't you hint gently to him that—that he might—come and see Gwe—us a little oftener ?'

George, who was well aware that Miss Maltravers was in love with Vernon, was amused at her little sister's transparent manœuvring.

'I don't quite see how I could say such a thing to him,' he answered with a smile.

Prue looked steadfastly at him.

'You know why I want him to come, don't you ?' she asked.

George nodded.

Prue sighed, and thought deeply for a few minutes. Then with the air of having made up her mind, she said resolutely,

‘You like Gwen, don’t you?’

‘Very much,’ replied George, more and more entertained.

‘You may just as well help me a little then,’ said Prue. ‘I wouldn’t speak about her to any one else, but we are friends, aren’t we?’

Her solemn black eyes interrogated George’s features anxiously. She felt that she was betraying Gwen, but nothing mattered if she could only help her, even a little.

‘Of course we are,’ George said kindly; ‘and I’ll do what I can, but you mustn’t count on my doing much. Vernon isn’t a man that likes to be interfered with.’

‘Oh,’ began Prue eagerly, but at that moment the door opened to admit her sister, and laying her finger on her lips to enjoin secrecy and silence, she sprang up to greet her.

‘Poor little devil!’ thought George as he left the house. ‘She has selected a curious confidant. Does she really imagine I am going to take Vernon to task about his neglect of her dear Gwen, and order him back to pay his court to Miss Maltravers? A pleasant reception I should be likely to get!’

About the middle of the week he received a second note from Lucy, begging him to be sure to come on Saturday or Sunday.

‘Why not come Sunday?’ it said, ‘and then we might go for one of our old trips. Do dear George try and come. Pa is very funny these days and I feel bad.’

George put the letter down—it was addressed to Burleigh Street this time—and reflected. This kind of thing was intolerable, he was not going to be persecuted in this way. He must break with the Mellons

altogether, only how? Old Mellon had distinctly hinted at a breach-of-promise case, and although, having nothing of his own, he could not be forced to pay any damages, still it would be exceedingly annoying and distasteful to him to have his name, at the outset of his career, dragged before the public in so ignominious a manner. The Hypatia Street incident in his life was completely unknown to his friends in this part of the town ; not a word had he ever breathed, either to Vernon or any of the men at the Thespis, about one of the Mellon family. He had hoped by a judicious course of silence and neglect to wean Lucy from thoughts of him, but old Mellon's visit had already frightened him a good deal, and Lucy's second letter convinced him that she would not let matters drift as he had proposed they should.

How could he get her to give up her engagement to him? For it must come from her, not from him, or else he would have the father down on him at once.

‘That comes of mixing oneself up with low people,’ he said to himself, as he gave an angry glance at the inoffensive scrap of paper, covered with Lucy’s dubious hieroglyphics, before him. ‘Imagine Mrs. Fellowes threatening a man with a breach-of-promise action! How shall I manage, what shall I do?’

He finally resolved that he must sacrifice his Sunday, and wrote Lucy to that effect, appointing to meet her at the Swiss Cottage Station, where they could then settle where they should spend the day. In this way he would get off without having to face the parents. Lucy he felt he could cope with, but he was afraid of Mrs. Mellon’s inqui-

sitorial glances, and was not desirous of another scene with Lucy's father.

He had got on pretty well with his play this week, gaining more confidence in himself as he proceeded. Half of the first act was written when he went to the theatre on Saturday night, written conscientiously and carefully, with many erasures and corrections, with much diffidence and misgiving. He was satisfied with what he had done, it seemed to him to be witty and original; but he distrusted his own judgment, and longed to get to the end of the act, so as to take it to Mrs. Fellowes.

He wanted to see her again, to sun himself in the approval of her beautiful eyes, to feel that she considered him her equal, that he interested her, that he was not insignificant in her opinion, that he counted for something in her world.

He had thought about her almost incessantly during these last days; she had become part and parcel of his very existence. He spoke to himself about the play as 'their play'; he would never think of one without the other again. He did not like, however, to venture to call in Cavendish Square until he had the first act of the play as an excuse; he had meant to work at it all Sunday, and it went down as an additional sin to Lucy's account that he would now have to give up those long, quiet hours of Sunday work.

He was punctual at the Swiss Cottage, but Lucy was there before him. He had come by train, she was waiting as he had asked her, just outside the station. He had a good view of her before she caught sight of him, for as she thought he would

come by omnibus, she was standing with her back to the station. She had on her old black gown, and a small black bonnet with poppies in it. Her skirt was rather short, leaving two cheap and badly-shaped boots very visible; between the end of her glove and the beginning of her sleeve was an inch and a half of firm, round, red arm. Her hair was curled very much in front, nearly meeting her eyebrows, and there were two little rows of tight curls behind, an improvement George had not noticed before. A pair of very bright turquoise earrings vied with the poppies in her bonnet; in her hand she held an umbrella with a so-called ivory handle, and a small green plush bag with steel clasps.

‘How very common-looking she has grown!’ thought George, and yet poor

Lucy was dressed almost exactly as she had been the first Sunday she went out with him, when she had seemed so trim and neat to eyes unaccustomed to anything better than the exceedingly free-and-easy garments of the landlady of the Bell and Boot. His mother wore all the year round a skirt shorter far than Lucy's, of some much enduring solid fabric, generally dingy brown in colour, and a cotton bodice, loose at the neck and everywhere else, which left the proportions of her ample figure comfortably, if unbecomingly, unconstrained. Mrs. Mellon and Lucy had seemed wonderfully well attired to George when first he came to London, but then of course at that time he did not possess a dress suit, and had never in his life entered a lady's drawing-room.

‘ Well, Lucy ! ’ he said a little awkwardly.

Lucy turned swiftly round, and her cheeks, which a moment before had been pale enough, turned rosy red.

‘Why, how did you come?’ she asked, after shaking hands. ‘I’ve been looking out for you ever so long.’

‘By train—the most natural way.’

‘Oh!’ said Lucy.

There was an embarrassed pause, and then she said archly,

‘Well, and now you’ve come at last, where are we going to go?’

‘Let’s walk up the Finchley Road and get round to the Heath,’ suggested George.

‘All right,’ said Lucy, and they set off.

George felt like a fish out of water. He wished he had not come.

‘How does the play get on?’ asked Lucy, after vainly waiting for him to say something.

George started. 'The play!' he repeated, wondering how in the world she could know about it.

'Why yes,' Lucy said, 'the piece at the Thespis.'

'Oh,' said George, 'it's doing very well, I believe.'

'That's a good thing, ain't it? Has old Fellowes raised your screw yet?'

'No, he hasn't,' said George crossly, 'and he isn't likely to.'

'Ain't he? Why, how mean! I hoped you'd have some good news for me.'

George making no reply, the girl continued,

'It's horrid at home just now. Ma's been ailing, and she and pa have been fighting most awful. He gave her a black eye the other night, the first time almost

he's struck her since I can remember. She did take on—my word !'

'What did he do that for?'

'I don't know exactly, she aggravated him, I s'pose,' said Lucy wearily. 'I only came in just at the finish, to find ma sobbin' and howlin' and him standing swearing most awful. It was a time, I can tell you.'

'But they're all right again now, I suppose?'

'Oh no, they ain't,' said Lucy. 'Ma says she'll not stop to be battered about, and she goes on at him every time he comes in. I daren't leave them alone a minute. I wouldn't have come out to-day for anybody but you,' she added, with an affectionate squeeze of his arm.

'That's why I thought, I hoped——' she went on timidly, 'I hoped you'd got a rise.'

'What difference would that make?'

said George, staring straight down the dusty road in front of him.

Lucy looked at what she could see of his face. How altered he was, and in how short a time ! She could not exactly define the change in him, she only knew that it was there. Her perceptions, never very delicate, had not felt the mental shrinking from her, the distaste for all she said and did, that made George so mute, so ill at ease in her society. She loved him as wholly, as heartily and frankly as ever, but her love was as little discerning as it was exacting. She was disappointed at his coldness this morning. She had had a very miserable week, and had so looked forward to to-day. Her voice had a quiver in it as she answered,

‘ If—if you could get a rise, ma and me could come away at once.’

‘That’s not in the least likely,’ said George dryly. ‘I shall get no rise as long as this piece runs.’

‘Of course——’ began Lucy, but stopped.

‘Of course what?’ George was obliged to say.

‘Of course we *could* manage, as things are, if we lived a bit near,’ said Lucy. ‘Ma’s such a wonderful manager.’

‘My dear girl,’ George said decisively, ‘I can’t have my mother-in-law to live with me. I wouldn’t do it if I had ten thousand a year.’

‘Why George!’ cried Lucy. ‘Why, you always agreed to that from the first.’

‘I didn’t understand it so,’ George answered.

‘Oh yes, you did! Ma was to cook and keep house for us, so as I could go on with

my work. Why, I couldn't leave ma behind, you know I couldn't.'

'That's not my fault.'

'I never said it was,' answered Lucy warmly, 'but you knew that all along.'

'You may have spoken of it, but so vaguely that I didn't take much notice,' said George.

Lucy plodded along without speaking for some way. Things were really much worse at home than she had told George. First of all, they had discovered that old Mellon had given a bill of sale on the furniture, which was nearly due; then her father, probably as a means of stifling his conscience, had been drinking more heavily than ever lately, and had become so violent in his cups that both she and her mother went in fear of their lives; while to crown all, Mr. Jarvis, tired of

wooing in vain, had announced his intention of leaving them. The girl did not know which way to turn; her mother's lamentations and fretfulness had nearly worn her out, the frequent scenes with her father terrified and disgusted her, the prospect of seeing the home she had worked for so hard, in which she took so much pride, sold over their heads, nearly broke her heart. It was all this accumulation of trouble that had made her feel she must see George; her father had told her very little about his visit to her lover, only mentioning that he had had business in the Strand, where he had met George, who had asked him home to his lodgings. Not a word did Mr. Mellon tell his daughter of having threatened or reproached George; so that while George thought that Lucy was now only following up what she had sent her father

to begin, she was in reality ignorant of what had passed between them. She had wanted to see George very badly; he was her natural comforter and adviser, he would make a way for her out of all her sorrows. His frigid reception of her confidences dismayed her beyond measure, she felt as if all the world had suddenly turned against her. He did not seem to understand the importance of what she told him; he had begun to whistle softly as they walked along. She had dropped his arm, partly in the hope that he would put her hand back again, but he had taken no notice. A lump came in her throat and her eyes grew wet.

‘You don’t seem to care much,’ she said in a tone he had never heard from her before.

‘Now then,’ he thought, ‘I must play my cards warily.’

‘Of course I care!’ he answered, ‘but what am I to do? You know what a wretched beggar I am.’

‘Ma and me are used to being poor,’ said Lucy.

‘Why don’t you leave your father, and go away with your mother to some quiet lodging for a time?’

‘It wouldn’t be any use. So long as I wasn’t married, pa could come and sell up any home we got.’

‘I can’t marry yet,’ said George doggedly, ‘and I must say, Lucy——’

‘What?’ asked Lucy, flushing.

‘Well——’ said George, affecting reluctance, ‘I hate to say it, but don’t you think it would be better not to—to bother me quite so much about it. It seems such a funny sort of thing for a girl to do, doesn’t it?’

He had made Lucy understand at last. She stood still, her breast heaving quickly, her face going white.

‘Do you mean that?’ she asked in a low voice. ‘Do you mean you think it ain’t modest of me to ask you when we can be married? You, as lived all those weeks in our house, and as I went out with constant? I looked upon us like as good as man and wife already, though if it hadn’t a been for ma I don’t suppose I should ever have said a word about getting married. But you don’t need to think I want to press you into marrying me against your will. I told you about poor ma because I loved you and I thought you loved me!’

Her voice broke at the last words, and the tears fell from her eyes, but she angrily brushed them away.

‘My dear Lucy——’ began George, try-

ing to take her hand, but she pushed him back. They had turned off from the main road into a little lane, and there was no one about.

‘No, keep away!’ she said; ‘I won’t ever trouble you—no, *bother* it was you said, wasn’t it?—again. I see I’ve been making a fool of myself, but that’s all over. You want to get rid of me, I understand now, though I was pretty dull at first. But now you can comfort yourself, Mr. L’Estrange, I give you back your fine promises and take my own. I’ll not pine for want of you, you may be sure. I know them as ’ll only be too glad to get what you make so precious light of.’

She turned round, after flashing a look of scorn at him that, indifferent as he was, brought the hot blood to his cheeks, and began walking quickly away.

Involuntarily he took a step forward, and his lips parted to call her, but the next second he stopped.

‘No, no, George my boy!’ he reflected, ‘you’ve got what you wanted, now let well alone.’

He did not feel a very fine fellow as he made his solitary way round to another station. He suffered a pang of self-pity at having had to put himself into so unpleasant a situation.

‘It does seem deucedly hard upon her, poor little girl,’ he thought. ‘I am really awfully sorry for her. But it was only kind to us both. She can marry Jarvis, as she is quite certain to do, and I can go on my way in peace.’



CHAPTER XXV

A SYMPATHETIC CRITIC

JUST a week from the Sunday which had given the death-blow to all Lucy's hopes, Mrs. Fellowes was sitting in her drawing-room awaiting the arrival of George L'Estrange, who was coming by appointment to read the first act of his play to her.

'I'm sure it will be very absurd, you know,' she said to her husband.

'I don't see why it should necessarily be absurd,' he answered. 'It may be un-

polished, but I shouldn't wonder if there were something in it. He's a clever young fellow.'

'Yes, I must say I think he is rather clever,' said Helen.

'Don't discourage him, even if there should be any fault to find,' said James Fellowes.

'Ah, you're always so soft-hearted!' returned Helen, smiling at him.

'I remember my own young days, you see, dear,' said her husband gently; 'it was hard work sometimes, and if my dear old mother hadn't stood by me——'

'Are you going to see her this afternoon?' asked Helen.

'Yes, indeed,' returned Mr. Fellowes, looking at his watch. 'Bless me, I'd no idea it was so late. Good-bye, my dear, I shall be back to dinner.'

'Good-bye,' said Helen, without looking

up from the Sunday paper on her lap ; and James Fellowes, with the heavy look on his face which had gradually settled there since his marriage, left his gorgeous house and took a hansom down to the modest, snug little place at Brixton, where, surrounded by comforts at which she was never weary of wondering, dwelt his mother, very old and bent, but very happy and contented. And while her son James and she talked over the maladies of her two cats and discussed the shortcomings of her neighbour's children, who would throw stones and bits of stick and paper over the garden wall, Mrs. Fellowes and George L'Estrange sat in the grand drawing-room in Cavendish Square, the one reading, the other listening to, the new play.

‘You must be quick,’ Helen said, when George came in, manuscript in hand, ‘or I

can't answer for our not being disturbed. People always come in on Sunday afternoons.'

George felt as shy as a schoolgirl. He had never been alone with Helen before; and it disconcerted him to find her looking at him with those penetrating eyes, which seemed to see so much and so far. How different Sunday afternoon was in this cool, flower-decked drawing-room from what it had been in his home! In summer he had always escaped directly after the mid-day dinner of underdone beef, succulent Yorkshire pudding, and baked potatoes, into the open fields; but in the colder months he had only had a choice between his own freezing bedroom and the best parlour, ringing with the echoes of the rough, hilarious voices from the bar, and liable at any moment to be invaded by

friendly but overpowering visitors. He was proud of himself as he sat down and unrolled his papers. He had not been in London six months, and yet what progress he had made.

He began to read, timidly and nervously at first, but gradually gaining confidence, he gave his dialogue the full benefit of his harmonious, sonorous voice.

Helen leaned back, listening attentively. She was surprised, and her attention arrested from the very first page.

Where had this country bumpkin, this inexperienced young man, who, her knowledge of the world told her, had never mixed in any society worth speaking of, where had he found his ideas, his expressions, his experience? How did he know what a lady would do and think—where had he seen and understood those delicate

shades of feeling commonly supposed to be the outcome of centuries of breeding? Had she undervalued him? Was he after all gently born and bred, or—was this the intuition of genius? Woman-like, she thought a great deal more of the cause than of the effect; while George was putting his best expression into his carefully written pages, she was wondering, not at their merit, but how he came to write them. When he paused, she said warmly,

‘Bravo! I wouldn’t have believed it!’

The tears came into George’s eyes.

‘You—like it?’ he faltered.

‘Like it? I think it promises splendidly!’ she returned quite enthusiastically. ‘If you can only keep it up like that to the end I feel sure it will be a success. I shall tell James about it at once.’

‘How—how good you are to me!’ said George, with real emotion.

‘Not at all,’ replied Helen, ‘I am only saying exactly what I think. I never do flatter, and it would be very cruel of me to tell you your piece was good if I didn’t really think so.’

‘Do you consider there is the least chance of your husband’s taking it?’

‘Finish it, and see!’

‘I’m going to grind awfully hard at it. I want to get it done in another month.’

‘Do. Then it will just be ready for James to take away with him.’

‘To take away?’

‘Yes, we shall be going to the Tyrol in about a month. The end of the season, you know.’

‘Oh!’ said George, to whom all seasons

had hitherto been alike. 'And how long shall you be away?'

'For a couple of months or so.'

'And—will the Thespis be shut during that time?'

'Oh dear me, no !' laughed Helen. 'Mr. Morton is just as good as James. He expects this piece to run until the autumn season. The country cousins will want to see it, you know. But my husband will like to take your play with him, he is never really happy away from his theatre. Of course I can't answer for James, nor can I say that it won't want arranging or revising before it's fit to put upon the stage. But I really do think it very clever as far as it has gone.'

'If it succeeds it will be to you I owe it,' said George.

'Oh, surely not !' smiled Helen.

‘Yes, indeed,’ George said, gazing earnestly at her. ‘You inspired me with the idea of it, and you are helping me to carry it out. You are——’

‘Oh, will you ring the bell, please?’ said Helen quietly, and George had to stop short just as he was getting fluent.

‘Tea, please,’ said Helen when the footman appeared, and then, without giving George time to wind himself up again, she began to talk on subjects of general interest, avoiding personal ground, but so kindly and so tactfully that George was quite at his ease, and serenely oblivious that he had been snubbed.

Some people presently came in, and George got no more *tête-à-tête* conversation, but he could look as much as he liked at Helen, a privilege of which he availed himself to the utmost, staring sentimentally

across at her until her visitors exchanged amused looks, and Helen herself grew annoyed and changed her position.

‘He’s very clever!’ she said to her husband when they met at dinner, ‘and I’m sure you’ll like his play, but he is extremely ill-bred. I can’t in the least understand where he can have sprung from, nor what he has been doing all these years.’

‘Didn’t he or Vernon tell you his story?’

‘Yes, he told me a good deal the first time he ever came here, but I am afraid I took his relation with a large spoonful of salt,’ answered Helen, laughing; ‘you know I am sure he draws the long bow tremendously.’

‘Vernon is very fond of him,’ observed Mr. Fellowes.

‘I know he is,’ said Helen, ‘he’s always

predicting all sorts of wonderful things about his dear L'Estrange.'

'By the way, where is Vernon? It seems odd not to see him at dinner on Sunday.'

'He said he would come in afterwards,' replied Helen, flushing. 'How was your mother?'

'Fairly well. She said it was a long time since she had seen you.'

'I have been so busy lately, but I'm going next week.'

Helen was very fond of old Mrs. Fellowes. Whenever she could manage it she drove down to Brixton and spent two or three hours with the old lady, listening to her stories about her good and clever son, who, by his marvellous industry and courage, had forced the current of fate into so smooth a channel for all about him.

‘He’s just a living wonder, my dear!’ she would say. ‘Such a puny lad as he was too, the most delicate of all the children! We never looked to see *him* grow up, and yet there he is, and every one of the others gone. If hard work could have killed him he would have been dead long ago, for I never did see a lad work like him. And I think if ever he had stopped to give a thought to his own self he would have dropped, but it was never his self with James. It was always mother, mother, with him, just as now it’s Helen, Helen!’

And then Helen would kneel down beside the wasted, beshawled old woman, and rest her head on that motherly lap, and wish that she had had a mother, and that she were a better woman.

She was as conscious of James’s goodness as his own mother could be; there were too

many evidences of it all around her for it to have been possible for her to ignore it, even if she had wished. She knew vaguely how kind and considerate he was to his household servants, how indulgent and generous to his employés; how alive he was to the struggles and sufferings of the poor, what an amount of real good he did in an unobtrusive way. James Fellowes's name rarely figured in a subscription list, he was never seen at so-called charity-dinners, he distributed neither soup, clothing, nor coal tickets. He was his own almoner, having a theory that the middle-man should be dispensed with in the distribution of gifts as well as in commerce, and that the fewer hands money destined for the poor passes through, the more the poor are likely to get of it. He was extremely shy of letting his good deeds be known. If Helen

was aware that he was very generous, she only knew the fact and none of the details. Her husband took as much pains to conceal his charitable actions as other people take to throw a cloak over their misdeeds.

To his wife he was lavishly munificent, constantly heaping new presents upon her, and giving her absolute *carte-blanche* in the matters of dress and housekeeping. He had early found out that Helen was not the woman to abuse his generosity; she dressed richly and well, as he wished her to do, and kept up his establishment with all due regard to his position; but she never spent any of his money on whims or sudden fancies, never ran up extravagant milliner's bills, and was most scrupulously exact in her accounts.

There was a great deal of mutual esteem between Mr. and Mrs. Fellowes. They

respected each other highly, and it was perhaps this fact which made their life together as bearable as it was. For it is hard for a man to live with a young and beautiful wife whom he loves passionately, and who does not care for him in the very least. Helen had told James Fellowes, when he proposed to her, that she did not love him. 'The love will come,' he had said, as so many men have said before him; and, as so many men have found, it did not come. He had been content to take her without the love, he had ever since been most scrupulously delicate about their relations; but what had at first seemed to him an immense happiness and privilege, had gradually become a state of torment. Perhaps no man who had not lived the intensely preoccupied existence of James Fellowes could or would have treated his

wife as he did; another man, who had loved and been loved several times before, on whose path various fragments of hearts and broken promises had been strewn, to whom women had been, as they are to so many men, commodities to be bought and sold, a man who 'knew' women, would have insisted on his rights, would have forced himself upon the woman to whom he had given his name, and who by her marriage vow had pledged herself to obey him. But deep under that rough, plain exterior of James Fellowes lay the shyest, most boyishly romantic of hearts. He lived in the midst of a great city, surrounded by vice and sin; from his peculiar position he was continually brought into contact with scandal and loose talk, he read the papers with their columns of fashionable divorce cases, he almost daily met women

whose private lives openly set every domestic law at defiance ; and yet, amid all this, James Fellowes retained an almost pathetic ideal of womanhood. He could not think that the poor lost creatures whom he could see any night thronging the street outside his theatre in all the ghastly mockery of painted cheeks and pencilled eyes—he could not think that their sisters in a higher rank of life flaunting that same terrible family resemblance, belonged to the same race of beings as his good old mother, as his beautiful, pure-eyed wife. The two were apart in his mind. His mother and wife were women ; the others—God help every one of them—he massed together, high and low alike, as wretches deserving of the greatest and most profound commiseration.

All these things, however, he had kept

to himself, just as he had most of his other thoughts all his life long. He had never at any time made a confidant or an intimate friend. Habits of reserve had grown upon him; his own mother really knew very little of his inner life, his wife perhaps still less. He had absolute confidence in Helen. Although he knew she did not, would never love him, he was also sure that she would keep his honour intact. He suspected that she cared for Richard Vernon, he more than suspected that Vernon cared for her; and yet, bitterly jealous and envious as he felt, he would have deemed it an insult to his wife to forbid Vernon the house, or even to hint to Helen that he should like him to come less often. He was Quixotic enough to believe in his wife's and his friend's honour, to the great amusement of his other friends,

who were all waiting to witness the usual reward of such foolish confidence.

Even Helen did not know that her husband was jealous of Vernon ; lacking the intuitive discernment that only love can give, she looked no deeper than the surface, never suspecting the troubled waters that lay beneath. Perhaps she preferred not to know ; she was often very unhappy and perplexed as it was, her life seemed all in a tangle just at this time, she was blindly pushing on, not knowing whither her heedless steps would lead her. It had seemed so easy to promise to be a good and true wife to James Fellowes ; just to sit at the head of his table and keep his house, to dress well and be a credit to him, that was what she had undertaken, and for a time it had not only been easy but pleasant. To her father's daughter the handling of un-

limited money was in itself so delightful a change that it alone compensated for such a small drawback as not being in love with one's husband ; while added to this comfort in material things was the equally novel joy of being somebody, of feeling that she held a position, that she was respected, looked up to. For so many years she had tried to hold her head high, in spite of poverty and humiliations. Insulted by indignant tradesmen and landladies, leered at and familiarly addressed by the blacklegs and *roués* who were her father's chosen companions, importuned and weakly adored by the hopeful scions of wealthy houses who came to be plucked by her father, and for whom she was brought forward as decoy ; now drinking champagne and driving in a carriage, now pleading with the butcher for another week's credit — who

could blame her if she seized the chance the wheel of Fate at last brought round to her, if she caught at happiness, at honoured peace, with greedy hands, not counting the cost till afterwards, when happiness and peace had grown to be everyday things, and she had leisure to think what more she wanted?

Why had she only loved Vernon when it was no longer possible for her to marry him? When he had proposed to her in the old days she had not refused him from any motives of pride or ultra-delicacy. No, she simply had not loved him. For a long time after her marriage, too, she had looked upon him only as a friend, very dear and valued, but nothing more. She had always trusted him. He had never either made light of her or openly sympathised, and yet she had felt he understood.

her troubles. Afterwards, when she was Mrs. Fellowes, she had thought that he had 'got over' his love for her, that he was quite cured and ready to be frankly friendly, and she had gone on getting friendlier and friendlier, until the day came when she could no longer blind herself to the truth. She had been playing to her husband and Vernon one evening after dinner. As she finished and was just rising from the piano, her eyes happened to meet Vernon's, which were fixed upon her. In that second, for it was hardly longer, she understood everything—understood that he loved her as well as ever, and, poor woman, that she loved him too. She had hurried away, and in the silence of her own room had passed through that bitter hour.

For the first time she called things by

their right names; at last she realised what she had been doing. She was a trusted wife; what was she doing with her husband's honour? Her love was not hers to give; it belonged morally at least to her husband, to the generous man who had snatched her from her misery, who had loaded her with his kindness. What was she to do now? Conscience told her that she must send Vernon away. So, and so only, could she be true to her husband. But then remarks would be made, people would say that her husband had been obliged to forbid Vernon the house; they always attacked the woman. And she—could she bear to see him no more—now, just when he was so dear to her? What would he do, too? Did she owe *him* nothing? Must she not think of him, of his happiness or his pain? She could be

brave, she would act a part. He should never suspect that she knew he cared for her still, nor, above all, that she loved him. She had plenty of self-control, her past life had at all events given her that, and it should serve her now.

So Inclination conquered and Duty went to the wall. Vernon came as often as ever, and Helen slowly and daintily tripped down the path leading to that awful abyss into which so many gifted and beautiful women have vanished. If her conscience troubled her at times, she silenced its voice by repeating to herself that her conduct was ruled by motives of expediency, that she was strong, and that no harm was being done to any one; and while James Fellowes's heart was slowly being broken, she went on her way, persuading herself that she was amply fulfilling her obligations

towards him by keeping his household accounts correctly and maintaining towards him an irreproachably polite and courteous attitude.





CHAPTER XXVI

DESERTED

POOR Lucy walked away, hardly knowing where she was going. She felt dazed, stunned. She had come out that morning feeling sure that her troubles would fade away into unimportance directly they had been confided to her lover's sympathetic ear, that she would return home strengthened and comforted, and able to take a more cheerful and patient view of things.

George's leaving Hypatia Street had in itself been a great trial to her; she had

come to look upon his daily presence as a matter of course, never anticipating that he would go away by himself. When he went, she and her mother would go too, she had always thought. And now he had gone, and left her behind; instead of the happy hours the idea of which had made all the others slip by magically fast, there were only solitary evenings to look forward to; no more of those pleasant suppers at which George had been wont to make them all laugh so, and which had been the most delightful time of the whole day; no more cosy little chats at breakfast-time, before George went to the Museum and she settled down to her work; no more buttons to sew on for him, no hat or coat to brush. For the first day or two it seemed almost as if he were dead, so great was the change.

He had promised to come to see her very

often, and to write to her. That, at least, was better than nothing. She supposed it likely that he would write soon, and began to watch the progress of the postman up the street with painful solicitude. At first she would stand on the doorstep waiting for his coming. She could see him a long, long way off, for Hypatia Street boasted of at least this merit, that it was perfectly straight. Its inhabitants were not much addicted to letter-writing, however, nor did they receive many communications through the post, so that the postman's progress was much more rapid than in streets of a higher class.

To Lucy he seemed to come very slowly indeed, and when he stopped, as he not infrequently did, to have a chat with the pretty girl at the baker's shop at the corner, she used positively to hate him. But when he came near No. 193 he always appeared

to be suddenly smitten with remorse for having wasted even a second of the Government's time, and walked quickly past, without even glancing at the bundle of letters and newspapers held in his hand. Every morning, every evening he passed the house, never turning in, until poor Lucy grew ashamed of being seen outside on the steps, and took to haunting Mr. Jarvis's parlour instead, when she was sure that its legitimate occupant was safely out of the way.

When several days had passed, and still no news came, she began to fret seriously. George must be ill, she was sure ; he never would neglect her like this. Or perhaps he meant to come, and so thought it not worth while to write. He was always very busy, she knew, and she had never yet seen him write a letter, very possibly he didn't like

writing letters. She wanted to write herself, but fear lest he should think her troublesome kept her from doing so. So she waited, and tried not to think her lover unkind, defending him loyally against the accusations of Mrs. Mellon, who did not scruple to abuse him very frankly.

‘He is a little selfish, your fine lover!’ she said one evening, when Lucy stole down to the sitting-room again, after having waited upstairs for the postman to pass.

‘Oh no, ma!’ answered the girl in a would-be cheerful tone. ‘George isn’t a bit selfish, not him. He’s awf’ly busy, you know. I expect he’ll come in to-morrow, very likely.’

Mrs. Mellon screwed up her mouth expressively, but said no more for the moment. Her reticence did not last very long, however, and it by no means lightened Lucy’s trials

to be compelled to hear her lover discussed in terms the reverse of flattering.

Then came additional worries. Mr. Mellon got into a bad way, coming home even less sober than usual, and showing, moreover, a disposition to be quarrelsome, which was productive of most uncomfortable results. Mrs. Mellon, anxious about her daughter's affairs, and pulled down in health by the long hot summer and her daily round of hard work, was not disposed to look with a lenient eye upon her lord and master's fresh delinquencies. Next came the discovery of the bill of sale, Mr. Jarvis's notice, and Mr. Mellon's outburst of actual violence, which seemed to put the climax to a long list of miseries.

In the thought of her lover's sympathy there had been comfort; she had looked forward to this Sunday, she had expected

so much from it, and this was the result! She had brought her sorrow to George, to him who was to take care of her for her whole life, and he had not only turned an indifferent and inattentive ear to the recital of her woes, but had even seized that opportunity to insult her, to abandon her!

For that was what it came to. She could not, even to herself, pretend that she had not understood him. This was no lovers' quarrel, which might last a day or two, to end then with kisses and excuses, with pardon and an increase of affection. George had not spoken or looked as a lover speaks and looks. His tone, his eyes, had been hard and cold, he had accused her of unwomanliness, and although Lucy was not likely to err on the side of oversensitiveness, she dimly understood that

a man who truly loved and respected a girl could not have made an insinuation which no amount of after-penitence could ever totally obliterate.

He had said she *bothered* him! She, who had loved him so honestly, so ungrudgingly, who had given herself up so entirely to the thought of him, who had only lived of late in the prospect of the future! George could not have found a better way of dealing a deadly blow to her feeling for him. A girl worth anything can never forgive a speech reflecting upon her maiden modesty, and Lucy felt that she would never forgive George what he had said.

She reached home in a deplorable state. Her mother, who opened the door to her, was frightened at her appearance.

‘Why, Lucie! But, my child, what is it?’

Why do you return so soon? Where is George?’

Lucy walked into Mr. Jarvis’s parlour, the door of which stood open, sank upon the little horse-hair sofa, and looked blankly at her mother.

‘What is it? What has happened?’ repeated Mrs. Mellon.

Lucy put up her hand and took off her bonnet, which she turned over and over, straightening the flowers and pulling out the loops of ribbon mechanically, but without speaking.

‘What is it?’ asked Mrs. Mellon for the third time. ‘Have you not seen George?’

Lucy bowed her head.

‘Then why have you come home without him? You have quarrelled?’

Lucy looked up, and tossed her bonnet to the end of the sofa.

‘That’s it!’ she said.

‘You have quarrelled! What about?
It was his fault, I am sure.’

‘Then you’re making a mistake!’ returned Lucy, with a laugh which sounded hard and unnatural even to herself. ‘It was my fault.’

‘Your fault?’

‘Yes.’

‘How? What have you been doing?’

‘I hurried him. I told him all about pa, and said I wouldn’t leave you behind, and—and—as good as asked him when we could be married.’ She stopped, and looked at her mother with burning eyes, into which no tears had as yet come.

‘Yes—and——?’

‘Oh, my gentleman was quite upset! Quite indignant. He says it ain’t the thing for a girl to *bother* her young man about

gettin' married, and anyhow, that he wasn't goin' to have no mothers-in-law in *his* house !'

'And what did you say ?' asked little Mrs. Mellon, turning pale.

'I told him,' answered Lucy, her voice getting louder, 'that he could take his promises back again. Oh, I didn't let him think I cared, I can tell you that, ma. You may make your mind easy as to that !'

'And so you quarrelled, parted like that ?' cried her mother. 'Just because of me, you let him go ?'

'He knew from the first,' said Lucy doggedly, 'as you were to live with us. I've never spoken no different.'

'But, silly child, one speaks, one speaks, and it is nothing ! When you get married, you will have your husband, and I—I

shall still 'ave mine. Your father is still there !'

'You always said you would live with us,' said Lucy.

'Yes, as one says. I very often say things, but mean them not. You must not quarrel with George for me, Lucie. It is natural that he does not wish his mother-in-law.'

'Oh, it wasn't only about you,' said Lucy. 'He had come meaning to quarrel. He wasn't a bit like himself from the first. I ain't good enough for him. That's the truth.'

Mrs. Mellon stared at her daughter.

'What do you say? *You*, not good enough? For this *va-nu-pieds*, this man of nothing? You? Why, do you know, my child, how many shirts this man 'ave got on his back? 'Do you know?'

At another time Lucy might have laughed at her mother's eccentric English, but she had not the heart now.

‘Never mind what he has, or what he hasn’t,’ she said wearily, ‘there’s one thing I know he hasn’t got, and that’s any love for me. I was a fool ever to think he had!’

‘He is a beast!’ said Mrs. Mellon vigorously. ‘Come, Lucie! There is your father and Jarvis coming up the steps. They have been out to refresh themselves before dinner. I must run and see to my beef!’

Lucy caught up her bonnet and fled upstairs.

‘I sha’n’t come down,’ she called to her mother over the banisters. ‘I don’t want no dinner.’

Mr. Mellon would not have asked for

his daughter, believing her to be out spending the day with George ; but Jarvis, although his affection for Mrs. Mellon had somewhat lessened of late, was not quite so unobservant as his landlord, and noticed that something was amiss. Mrs. Mellon's cheeks were flushed, and she was apparently on the verge of tears.

‘Is anything wrong with you? Are you not well?’ he asked.

Mrs. Mellon did not require any pressing to pour forth her grievance.

‘Lucie has come in,’ she answered, with a significant nod.

‘Has she?’ said Jarvis, surprised, while Mr. Mellon turned a couple of bleared eyes upon her, and paused in the act of conveying a well-packed fork to his mouth.

‘Yes, she has come in. She is upstairs.

She can eat no dinner,' said Mrs. Mellon, sighing.

'Has she seen L'Estrange?' asked Jarvis, hastily leaping at a conclusion which might prove all the better for him.

Mrs. Mellon nodded again.

'Yes, she has seen him. They have quarrelled—and they have parted!' she answered dramatically.

Mr. Mellon's eyes grew larger and larger. He began to puff and pant in an alarming manner.

'They have parted!' repeated Jarvis, getting very red. 'What did they quarrel about?'

But Mrs. Mellon was far too wise to tell him. She was not going to diminish Lucy in his eyes.

'You can ask her,' she said. 'No doubt it is only a few days' quarrel. He is so

fond of her that he is sure to be here to-morrow or next day upon his knees. But she is very angry with him.'

Mr. Mellon whistled. He had his own opinion upon the subject of George's fervent affection for his daughter.

Mrs. Mellon turned angrily upon him.

'And so now we are complete!' she said. 'Our furniture gone, and Lucy engaged no more! Now you are happy, I suppose.'

'Here, stow that, old gal!' growled Mellon, who was by no means in a conciliatory mood. 'It's no use giving me any of your cheek. I wish L'Estrange joy, that's all I can say! He's well rid of such a termagant. Wish I could get rid of her as easy.'

Mrs. Mellon was about to make some indignant retort, but Jarvis silenced her with a look. Mr. Jarvis's eyes were very

bright, and he wore quite a different air from that with which he had come in a little while before.

Dinner being over, he drew Mrs. Mellon outside with a mysterious look.

‘Come in here a minute,’ he said, leading the way into the minute kitchen. ‘I want to say something to you.’

Mrs. Mellon followed him, and sat down upon the box which served as a seat.

‘Oh, my good Jarvis, it is too much!’ she sighed, putting her apron to her eyes. ‘There is no end to our troubles. Everything is gone wrong with us since this George came among us. What shall I do? What can I do?’

‘Don’t cry, Mrs. Mellon,’ said little Jarvis manfully, ‘but look here. Your husband has been telling me this morning of the hobble you’re in on account of the bill of

sale he gave. I didn't know anything about it before.'

'No?' said Mrs. Mellon, dropping her apron and beginning to wonder what her lodger was going to say.

'No,' said Jarvis, and, coming a step or two nearer, he went on earnestly, 'you know, don't you, ma'am, how I've loved Miss Lucy, almost ever since I set eyes on her at old Simpkin's party, years ago?'

'I know it,' answered Mrs. Mellon.

'And I've asked her to have me, many and many a time. And she never would. At first she used only to laugh at me and put me off, and I used to think, "have a little patience, Jarvis, my boy, she'll come round yet," and after a while I'd try again. And then there came this L'Estrange. I never liked *him* from the

beginning, although he could patter like a cheap Jack, and no mistake. But he got hold of Miss Lucy, and then there wasn't any more hope for me, not a bit. You must have seen how hard it hit me, I've not been the same man since. The news you told me just now was good news for me, ma'am. If Miss Lucy has quarrelled with L'Estrange there's room for me again, do you see?'

'Yes, but Lucy cannot turn round like that,' said Mrs. Mellon, with a doubtful shake of her head.

'Did you never hear of a saying about "catching a ball on the rebound," ma'am? That's what I mean to do with Miss Lucy. You have a little patience, and you shall see. Allow me to withdraw my notice, and to continue on as your lodger. We'll see about the bill of sale, and—oh, this is a

joyful day !' finished the little man, wiping his brow energetically. 'You tempt Miss Lucy out of her room presently, ma'am, and I'll go and lay in some 'winkles for tea !'

END OF VOL. II





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